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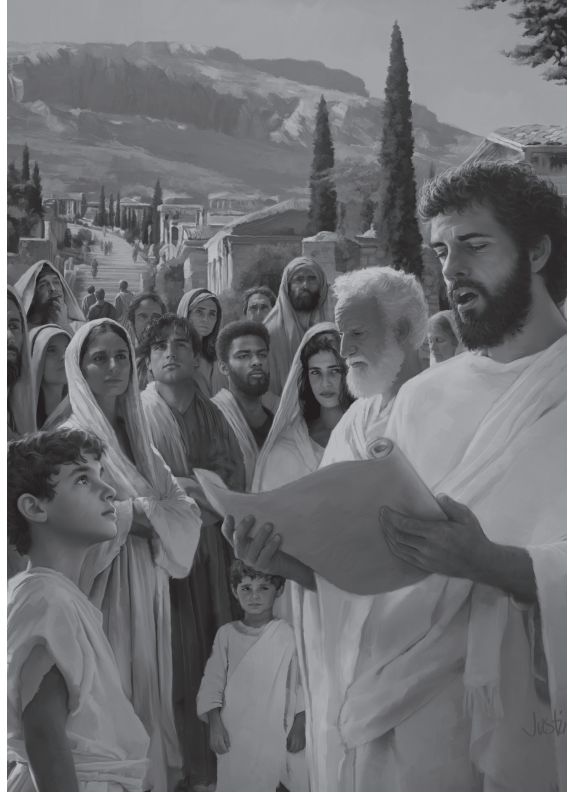
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The Essence of Christian Life and Witness



Writing letters is an age-old activity that has not become obsolete. We've merely changed the way that letters are written. Yes, social media superseded paper. However, in their essence, emails and other forms of electronic letters exert basically the same function: they connect people by exchanging information, feelings, and thoughts.

Why do people write letters? A possible answer is that they have something to say. So it was with the apostle Paul. Although he had so much to say, he did not always have the chance to be face-to-face with those whom he wanted to talk.

So, he wrote letters instead—such as to the Corinthians, which contain some of Scripture's most profound truths. Among them are: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (*1 Cor. 2:2, ESV*), and "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (*2 Cor. 8:9, ESV*). And what about the stunning hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13?

On the other hand, whoever reads Paul's letters to the Corinthians will inevitably get perplexed, not only because of some substantial problems within the church—such as sexual immorality—but also because of the nitpicking that results from cheap factionalism among the members. If you think your church has challenging issues, get ready to see the avalanche of quarrelings Paul had to deal with in Corinth. Perhaps your local church's problems are not as significant as you

imagine! Very likely, you will see that things in Corinth had been much worse.

As disturbing as the problems in Corinth had been, the letters to the Corinthians capture our attention, not because of the problems but because of the remarkable way Paul faces them. By exhorting the church members to evaluate themselves, their behavior, and the surrounding culture in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, he exalts the message of the Cross. To use the words of Paul himself elsewhere, any standard lower than the gospel message is to be seen as “anathema” (*Gal. 1:8, 9, ASV*).

In Paul’s time, Corinth was famous for its wealth and strong commerce, all thanks to its port, architecture, shipbuilding, and ceramics. The city was an important financial center. Nevertheless, it was also known for its sexual immorality, religious cacophony, and shrines dedicated to various gods. Indeed, daily life in Corinth was marked by flagrant idolatry. This historical-cultural background helps us understand Paul’s main concerns regarding the Christians in that city and, consequently, his exhortations to them.

This quarter, we will survey Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. In these two remarkable New Testament books, the apostle presents the gospel message as the essence of Christian life and witness, the lens through which everything else is to be judged. No matter the challenges each of us individually or the church in general faces in our journey to heaven—the answer to the most puzzling issues in our work for Christ is the same as for the Corinthians: “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (*1 Cor. 2:2, NKJV*).

Jesus is coming soon. This is a time for more unity in Christ, for an openness to the Holy Spirit as never before, for diligent use of the spiritual gifts, and for a more profound experience with our resurrected Lord. It is time for a genuine Christian ministry, engagement in stewardship and mission, spiritual warfare against false teachings, and growth in grace, love, and fellowship. This is a time to hold fast and be faithful to the message of the Cross, and Paul’s letters to the Corinthians teach us to do just that.

This is a time to hold fast and be faithful to the message of the Cross, and Paul's letters to the Corinthians teach us to do just that.

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How to Use This Teachers Edition

“The true teacher is not content with dull thoughts, an indolent mind, or a loose memory. He constantly seeks higher attainments and better methods. His life is one of continual growth. In the work of such a teacher there is a freshness, a quickening power, that awakens and inspires his [class].”

—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 103.

To be a Sabbath School teacher is both a privilege and a responsibility. A privilege because it offers the teacher the unique opportunity to lead and guide in the study and discussion of the week’s lesson so as to enable the class to have both a personal appreciation for God’s Word and a collective experience of spiritual fellowship with class members. When the class concludes, members should leave with a sense of having tasted the goodness of God’s Word and having been strengthened by its enduring power. The responsibility of teaching demands that the teacher is fully aware of the Scripture to be studied, the flow of the lesson through the week, the interlinking of the lessons to the theme of the quarter, and the lesson’s application to life and witness.

This guide is to help teachers to fulfill their responsibility adequately. It has three segments:

- 1. Overview** introduces the lesson topic, key texts, links with the previous lesson, and the lesson’s theme. This segment deals with such questions as Why is this lesson important? What does the Bible say about this subject? What are some major themes covered in the lesson? How does this subject affect my personal life?
- 2. Commentary** is the chief segment in the Teachers Edition. It may have two or more sections, each one dealing with the theme introduced in the Overview segment. The Commentary may include several in-depth discussions that enlarge the themes outlined in the Overview. The Commentary provides an in-depth study of the themes and offers scriptural, exegetic, illustrative discussion material that leads to a better understanding of the themes. The Commentary also may have scriptural word study or exegesis appropriate to the lesson. On a participatory mode, the Commentary segment may have discussion leads, illustrations appropriate to the study, and thought questions.
- 3. Life Application** is the final segment of the Teachers Edition for each lesson. This section leads the class to discuss what was presented in the Commentary segment as it impacts Christian life. The application may involve discussion, further probing of what the lesson under study is all about, or perhaps personal testimony on how one may feel the impact of the lesson on one’s life.

Final thought: What is mentioned above is only suggestive of the many possibilities available for presenting the lesson and is not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive in its scope. Teaching should not become monotonous, repetitious, or speculative. Good Sabbath School teaching should be Bible-based, Christ-centered, faith-strengthening, and fellowship-building.

Paul's Ministry *in* Corinth



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Cor. 1:1, Gal. 1:1, Acts 17:16–34, 1 Cor. 5:9–11, Acts 18:4–10, 2 Cor. 2:4.*

Memory Text: “One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people’ ” (*Acts 18:9, 10, NRSV*).

The great English missionary William Carey used to say that he cobbled shoes to pay his expenses, but his real business was winning souls.

Likewise, Paul worked as a tentmaker for a living (*Acts 18:1–3*), but his real business was, of course, winning people to Christ.

This week, we will get a glimpse of Paul's ministry to the church in the city of Corinth. The church, as we will see, was full of problems, many that were not unlike what our churches face today, almost two thousand years later. Indeed, anyone who has been in Christianity for any length of time, or who has been involved in church work, could ask the question: Have you ever found a Christian group that doesn't have any problems? The answer is, of course, obvious.

Paul faces challenges in Corinth but does so with the message of the Cross (*1 Cor. 2:2*). Faithfulness to this message is also the way to face the challenges that we have today. As we will see this week and throughout this quarter, the message of 1 and 2 Corinthians applies to our lives, as well.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 4.

Paul, a God-called Apostle of Jesus

Paul begins his letter to the Corinthians by identifying himself as an apostle of Jesus, called “through the will of God” (*1 Cor. 1:1; compare with 2 Cor. 1:1*). His conviction regarding who he is in relation to Jesus is so firm that, with a few exceptions, this is the way he opens all his letters.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1 and Romans 1:1. What two elements of Paul’s ministry are emphasized in these passages? (*See also Gal. 1:1.*)

Paul speaks of his calling and apostleship as fulfilling God’s will. He is convinced that his calling is not from men but from God (*Gal. 1:1*). Paul was called by God from his mother’s womb like Jeremiah (*Jer. 1:5*) as an act of God’s grace (*Gal. 1:15*), and it happened so that he would proclaim the gospel of Christ among the Gentiles.

In 1 Corinthians 15:8, Paul includes himself among those to whom Christ appeared after the Resurrection (*1 Cor. 15:5–7*). A few verses later, he implies that his calling to be an apostle resulted from that encounter with Jesus (*1 Cor. 15:9–11*).

The title “apostle of Jesus” encompasses a series of concepts. Primarily, it conveys the idea of one whom Jesus sends. Nevertheless, Paul also uses this phrase to identify himself as a servant of Christ (*Rom. 1:1, Titus 1:1, Gal. 1:10*), as well as a preacher and a teacher (*1 Tim. 2:7, 2 Tim. 1:11*). Whether Paul preaches or teaches, Christ is always in evidence. In short, Paul is an apostle of Jesus.

Jesus is not only the center of Paul’s apostleship; He is the center of Paul’s life. Paul’s thoughts and feelings were filled with the presence of Jesus. Evidence of this fact is that he refers to Jesus repeatedly in the opening and in the thanksgiving section of 1 Corinthians (nine times in nine verses). Paul loved Jesus so much that he couldn’t stop thinking and talking about Him. He wanted to share Jesus with those under his care so that their lives would be Christ-centered, too. While he was called to be an apostle, they were called to be faithful followers of Jesus in whatever capacity to which the Lord called them.

Paul was called to be an apostle. What is your calling, and how do you know that it is your calling? If you don’t think you have one, why not go right now and ask Him to show you the work He chose you to do?

From Athens to Corinth

Read Acts 17:16–34. Where was Paul before going to Corinth, and what did he do there?

Acts 17:16–34 describes Paul’s preaching to the Athenians before his going to Corinth. Apparently, he did not plan to visit Athens at that moment, but went there with the help of some friends because of the opposition that he faced at Berea (*Acts 17:13–15*).

Those who went with Paul to Athens returned to Berea with a command for Timothy and Silas to join him as soon as possible (*Acts 17:15*). Acts 17:16–34 is about what Paul does while waiting for them. He speaks about Jesus in the synagogue, the marketplace, and the Areopagus. He really couldn’t stop talking about Jesus and took advantage of every opportunity to do it.

Read Acts 18:1–11. What does Paul do when he arrives at Corinth and during his whole stay in that city?

Paul went to Corinth during his second missionary journey. Luke informs us that Paul stayed there a year and a half.

As usual, Paul begins his missionary activity at the synagogue (*Acts 18:4–6*). Acts 17:1, 2 mentions that this was his custom. He followed the “to-the-Jew-first” strategy (*Rom. 1:16, Acts 13:46*), just as Jesus had commanded His apostles (*see Acts 1:8*).

When finally Silas and Timothy joined him in Corinth, he “was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus” (*Acts 18:5, ESV*). During his stay in Corinth, he was busy “teaching the word of God” (*Acts 18:11, NKJV*). It was in this context, too, that he expressed those famous words that he was “determined not to know anything among” the Corinthians “except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (*1 Cor. 2:2, NKJV*).

What can we learn from Paul’s missionary activity in Athens and Corinth? What makes sharing the gospel so challenging in our cities and communities today? How can we share the gospel with success in these difficult places? What strategies can we learn from Paul’s missionary activity about how to best do that?

The City of Corinth

Read Acts 18:1–3, 1 Corinthians 5:9–11, and 1 Corinthians 8:4. What can we infer about Corinth’s economy, morality, and religious life?

Corinth was an important center of the ancient world, renowned for its prosperous commerce. The city was destroyed by Rome in 146 B.C. and rebuilt by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony in 44 B.C. It is this Roman Corinth that appears in the New Testament. In the time of Paul, Corinth was one of Athens’ rivals and had even surpassed it in various aspects. Corinth had two important harbors that made the exchange of merchandise and the development of its commerce easy.

Indeed, Paul chose Corinth because of its importance and advantaged geographic location. “An opportunity was thus presented for the spread of the gospel. Once established at Corinth, it would be readily communicated to all parts of the world.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, p. 99.

In addition, the flourishing commerce of Corinth would make it easier for Paul to support himself by producing and selling tents while proclaiming the gospel in that city (*Acts 18:2, 3*). Obviously, missionary work in a large and wealthy city is not free of challenges. Corinth was marked by a blatant religious pluralism (*1 Cor. 8:5*), as evident by its numerous shrines built in homage to such deities as Apollo, Athena, and Aphrodite, among others, and even the worship of such Egyptian gods as Serapis and Isis.

In addition to this religious confusion, Corinth was also known for its sexual licentiousness. Strabo, a Greek geographer and historian, mentions that there were 1,000 sacred prostitutes devoted to the worship of Aphrodite in her temple at Corinth. Although many scholars view this with suspicion and connect this claim to Athenian propaganda against Corinth, ritual prostitution was common in the ancient world. Sexual immorality was a problem in Corinth, as elsewhere. Idolatry and immorality were part of daily life, and this sad reality explains much of the content of 1 and 2 Corinthians.

In his missionary activity in Corinth, Paul faced the challenge of an idolatrous and licentious society. What challenges in today’s culture can make it hard to preach the gospel? How can we overcome them? How much difference, if any, is there between Corinth and our cities today?

“Many in This City”

Read Acts 18:4–8. What were the results of Paul’s preaching?

The work of Paul among the Jews at Corinth was not as fruitful as he wanted it to be. He had to face some hostility and hatred. The Bible says that “they opposed him and blasphemed” (*Acts 18:6, NKJV*). When the object of the Greek verb *blasphēmeō* (“to blaspheme”) is a human being, it means “to revile” or “to defame.” In other words, they intended to stain Paul’s reputation and to prevent him from succeeding in his missionary endeavors.

Fortunately, the work of Paul in the Corinthian synagogue was not in vain. After all, God was in charge of this mission. He promised, “[My word] shall not return to me empty” (*Isa. 55:11, ESV*). Some Jews did not expect that Crispus, the synagogue’s ruler, and his entire household would accept Jesus as the Messiah and get baptized (*Acts 18:8*). In addition, “many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized” (*Acts 18:8, NKJV*), very likely also because of the influence of Crispus.

Read Acts 18:9, 10. What can we infer about Paul’s feelings in the face of his challenges in Corinth? How did God encourage His servant?

Right after Paul left the synagogue, he had an experience that brought him encouragement. Christ Himself appeared to him by night in a vision, with words that recall Isaiah 41:10: “Fear not, for I am with you” (*NKJV*). Indeed, Paul admits he was in Corinth “in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling” (*1 Cor. 2:3, NKJV*). He had to depart from Berea to Athens because of staunch opposition. He seems to have thought he would have to leave Corinth for the same reason: great opposition. But that would not happen this time. Jesus said to him: “‘I have many people in this city’” (*Acts 18:10, NKJV*). And Paul was His instrument to take the news of salvation to them.

Read Isaiah 41:10. What wonderful promises does God give you in this verse? What hope do they give you right now in your life?

Paul's Letters to the Corinthians

Read 1 Corinthians 1:11–13; 1 Corinthians 4:14; 1 Corinthians 5:11; 1 Corinthians 7:1; and 1 Corinthians 14:37, 40. Also read 2 Corinthians 1:12, 2 Corinthians 2:9, 2 Corinthians 11:3, and 2 Corinthians 13:10. How do these passages help us understand why Paul wrote letters to the Corinthians?

Paul was in Ephesus when he wrote 1 Corinthians (*1 Cor. 16:5–9*). The family of Chloe went to him with the report that things were not going too well back in Corinth (*1 Cor. 1:11*). In 1 Corinthians 1–6, Paul addresses the issues brought by Chloe's household. The problems include factionalism, sexual immorality, lawsuits, and prostitution. Paul also received a letter with specific questions (*1 Cor. 7:1*). His response fills the space from chapter 7 onward. The questions were related to marriage, divorce, celibacy, food sacrificed to idols, conduct in worship, the use of spiritual gifts, and incorrect understanding of the resurrection. The church of Corinth was very problematic and immature. Perhaps your local church has many problems. Yet the church at Corinth was probably worse.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is very relevant to our time, as well. After all, don't we, to some degree, face some of the same issues in many of our churches today? This letter has much to say to us. It is "one of the richest, most instructive, most powerful of all his letters."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 301.

Paul may have written three or four letters to the Corinthians (*compare with 2 Cor. 10:9*). He wrote an initial letter before 1 Corinthians (*1 Cor. 5:9*), but it is lost. Before 2 Corinthians, he wrote a letter referred to by scholars as the "severe letter" (*2 Cor. 2:3, 4, 9; 2 Cor. 7:8*), but it is lost, too. Some think he is referring to 1 Corinthians, or that this letter is partly preserved in 2 Corinthians.

From 2 Corinthians, we realize that the members of Corinth were influenced by the surrounding culture. They valued such things as competition, power, and wealth, all things that can challenge our church today, as well. Conversely, Paul sought to create a Christ-focused culture, a way of seeing the world through the lens of the gospel. How crucial that we, too, see our present world through the lens of the gospel.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:4 again. What does this verse tell you about how much Paul cared for these people? In contrast, how much love is in your heart for others?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Corinth,” pp. 243–254, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“In preaching the gospel in Corinth, the apostle followed a course different from that which had marked his labors at Athens. . . . He determined to avoid elaborate arguments and discussions, and ‘not to know anything’ among the Corinthians ‘save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 244.

“Paul had a measure of success,” but he “doubted the wisdom of building up a church from the material he found there. He considered Corinth a very questionable field of labor, and determined to leave it. . . .

“As he was contemplating leaving the city for a more promising field, . . . the Lord appeared to him in a vision of the night, and said, ‘Be not afraid, but speak, . . . for I have much people in this city.’ Paul understood this to be a command to remain in Corinth, and a guarantee that the Lord would give increase to the seed sown. . . . A large church was enrolled under the banner of Jesus Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, pp. 106, 107.

“It is recorded that Paul labored a year and six months in Corinth. His efforts, however, were not exclusively confined to that city. . . . He made Corinth his headquarters. . . . Several churches were thus raised up. . . . The absence of Paul from the churches of his care was partially supplied by communications weighty and powerful, which were received generally as the word of God. . . . These epistles were read in the churches.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, p. 109.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Paul was convinced that he was an apostle of Jesus and that this calling was from God. Why is it so important to know who we are and what our call is?
- 2 For a moment, Paul felt like giving up his missionary work in Corinth and leaving the city. What caused him to change his mind? How can this help us when we feel like giving up a missionary project? Might there be, though, a time we should?
- 3 The church members in Corinth were significantly influenced by the surrounding culture. This is also a stark reality among us today. How can we be in the world (*John 17:11, 15*) and not be influenced by what “is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life” (*1 John 2:16, ESV*)? What are other ways that our church is being influenced negatively by the surrounding culture?

Return of the Pioneer

By RICK KAJIURA

There is nothing like the thrill of visiting a Global Mission pioneer. Even more exciting is seeing them meeting with their small group of fledgling believers. I remember doing this in a house church up a dusty road in a mountain village in Indonesia and sneaking into a small apartment in a concrete-block building in an eastern European country. I remember the rustling sound of a blue tarp underfoot and over our heads in southeast Asia and seeing a pioneer teaching the Sabbath School lesson under trees in rural Africa.

Yet, the church I visited recently was totally different. The pioneers had left years ago. This time I saw a church building, with a school next door. The church has 125 members, and the school is considered one of the best in the city.

There were no Adventists in this city when the pioneers arrived. They started trying to sell books, canvassing door to door. They tried to rent a place to hold meetings, but people refused to rent to them. They got the message; they weren't welcome in this city.

Instead, they received an invitation to go to a nearby town. There they were able to rent a hall and start work. Before long they had a small group started with five baptized members. Then they were invited to another town, and before long they had a group with 37 members.

It took years before they finally were accepted in the main city and were able to find a meeting place. They started a small group and soon they had 30 members. Since then, this church has given birth to four "baby churches." The small groups in those nearby towns also have grown into full churches, and each of them has started baby churches. One of the original pioneers who helped start these churches returned to visit the area with me. He is now the Adventist Mission director for the region and showed me how God had blessed his efforts through the years.

Pioneers still are going to unreached areas today. Pioneers such as Taguhi and Aghvan are working in an area with very few Adventists. Please pray for missionaries and Global Mission pioneers as they start new work in the 10/40 Window, the large cities of the world, and among post-Christian people. May God bless their work as they share the gospel and start new worshipping groups.

Global Mission pioneers are laypeople sent to start new groups of believers in unreached areas or among unreached people groups. They are paid a small stipend and often work within their own culture. Learn more about Global Mission pioneers: bit.ly/GMPioneers.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Acts 18:9, 10*

Study Focus: *1 Cor. 1:1–3, Acts 18:4–10.*

Introduction

A recent cartoon shows a large older woman sitting in a doctor's office. The doctor has an astonished look on his face. The caption below the cartoon reads: "Doctor, I identify as a slim 16-year-old, and I find it deeply offensive that you say that my weight at my age is threatening my health."

As this cartoon humorously shows, perception is a key part of identity. Entities who struggle to define their identity also will struggle to accomplish their purpose or mission in life.

This week's lesson introduces two mission-driven books of the New Testament: 1 and 2 Corinthians. We are also introduced to the author, Paul himself, particularly his mission and purpose for reaching out to the Corinthians.

Lesson Themes

Beyond an introduction to the background history of the church in Corinth and how it was founded, the lesson will focus on the following issues and themes:

- 1. Cultural and Historical Backdrops.** We will consider the important cultural and historical backdrops relevant for the study of the epistles to the Corinthians.
- 2. Strategic Ministry.** What was Paul's strategy for ministry in Corinth? In pursuit of the answer to this question, we will consider Paul's mission strategy in Corinth within the framework of the early Christian church.
- 3. Identity.** Identity is key to mission. It bears repeating that entities who struggle to define their identity will also struggle to accomplish their mission. Our discussion of identity will seek to answer the following questions:
 - a. Why did Paul identify as an apostle?
 - b. What role does identity play in mission?
 - c. What kind of identity did the church in Corinth have?
 - d. How can we maintain a Christian identity in a world that emphasizes different values and ideals?

Part II: Commentary

1. Background: First Corinthians is one of the longer letters in the New Testament. Like Romans, it consists of 16 chapters, totaling 433 verses. It is a pastoral letter to a recently established church that faces significant ethical, theological, and interpersonal issues. Paul clearly identifies himself as the author of 1 Corinthians (*1 Cor. 1:1*), and in 1 Corinthians 16:21, he includes a reference to his signature by his own hand. Second Corinthians is shorter (13 chapters, totaling 257 verses) and contains much more personal information about the apostle Paul. The epistle describes comprehensively the apostle’s understanding of his apostolic ministry. Some have used the Latin phrase *apologia pro vita sua*, “defense of his life,” as an appropriate designation of the content and focus of 2 Corinthians (see Leland Ryken and Philip Graham Ryken, “2 Corinthians: Introduction,” in *The Literary Study Bible: ESV* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2007], p. 1715). In this letter, Paul defends his apostolic ministry to some detractors in the Corinthian church and offers an example of how Christian life and ministry should be lived.

The correspondence between Paul and the young congregation in Corinth has been a matter of scholarly discussion. First Corinthians seems to be an answer to some questions that were sent by mail to Paul (*see, for example, 1 Corinthians 7:1*)—perhaps in response to an earlier letter the apostle had sent that doesn’t exist anymore, possibly referenced in 1 Corinthians 5:9. It is possible that there were more exchanges between Paul and the Christian community in Corinth, following that first letter, which are not available to us now.

Presumably, these exchanges would have preceded the second letter, which is now part of our biblical canon. First Corinthians was written about A.D. 55 from Ephesus (compare with “1 Corinthians,” *Andrews Bible Commentary*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez et al. [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022], p. 1613), while 2 Corinthians has a more likely date of A.D. 56.

2. Strategic Ministry in Corinth: Paul’s ministry in Corinth is described in Acts 18. The apostle had ministered there for more than 18 months. The ancient city of Corinth had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. and was rebuilt in 44 B.C. by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony. It soon became a significant political and economic center that was strategically located in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Its two ports, Cenchræe in the east and Lechaëum in the west, offered a safe land connection between the Aegean and Ionian seas. Corinth’s control of the two harbors and of the road crossing the 6-kilometer-wide isthmus enabled the city to levy taxes on both north-south and east-west trade (compare with Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “Corinth,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of*

the Bible, ed. K. Doob Sakenfeld [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006], vol. 1, pp. 732–735).

The city offered great economic possibilities, and the opportunities for upward social mobility attracted many nationalities. Because it was a relatively young city, Corinth also was less controlled by ancient traditions and more open to new ideas. Rome designated the city as the capital of the province of Achaëa, thus underlining its political importance. Paul’s strategic decision to invest more than 18 months of his life in ministry in Corinth offers us a good example of his intentional mission planning.

Paul’s ministry in Corinth followed a familiar pattern. He was hosted in the city by Aquila and Priscilla, two Jewish Christian converts who had been forced out of Rome by a decree from Claudius, banning all Jews from the city (*Acts 18:2*). Aquila and Priscilla were also tentmakers (*Acts 18:3*). Strategically, Paul visited first the synagogue on Sabbath (*Acts 18:4*) and focused his teaching—when invited to read the weekly readings from the Torah—on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (*Acts 18:5*).

By showing the true interpretation of well-known Messianic texts, Paul was able to engage the Jewish members of the community on familiar ground. Paul’s interpretation and preaching, however, often created conflict and tension during his missionary journeys, which led him, in Corinth, to refocus his attention on the “God-fearers.” The God-fearers were Gentiles who often resonated with Jewish teachings but who were not proselytes (*see Matt. 23:15*). *Acts 18:7* reports that Paul preached in the house of Titius Justus, a non-Jewish neighbor of the synagogue in Corinth. Among those who were convinced of Paul’s preaching was Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, along with his entire house, together with many others (*Acts 18:8*).

3. The Importance of Identity: Identity shapes our beliefs, our understanding of history, and also our own sense of being. After his experience on the road to Damascus (*Acts 9*), Paul’s identity is anchored in his divine call to follow Jesus and be an apostle (i.e., an envoy and messenger) of Jesus. Paul, together with his co-author Sosthenes, begins his first letter to the Corinthian church by claiming that he was “called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus” (*1 Cor. 1:1, ESV; compare with 2 Cor. 1:1*). The Greek verb *apostellein*, “to send,” underlies the noun *apostolos*, which—surprisingly—is seldom used in Greek literature outside of the New Testament. The use of a relatively rare word to identify a crucial ministry in the early Christian church may have been a conscious attempt to communicate the foundational importance of the ministry of the apostles, as well as the unique function of those who were sent, which, including Paul, went beyond the Twelve, as the reference in Romans 16:7 may suggest:

“Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles” (*NKJV*).

Paul’s identity is rooted in three things: (1) the experience of his calling in which he saw the risen Lord (*1 Cor. 15:8, 9; Gal. 1:15, 16*); (2) his commissioning by God to proclaim the gospel (*Gal. 1:1; compare with Acts 9:15*); and (3) the fruits of his apostolic ministry, represented by converts and new churches (*1 Cor. 9:2*). Acts offers a number of Paul’s testimonies that retell his calling, his commissioning, and his fruit, underlining the importance of these elements for his ministry. While he acknowledges his excellent education at the feet of famous scholars and his membership in the strict sect of the Pharisees, his identity is not based on prestige and accomplishments but on his encounter with Jesus Christ.

Identity seems also to be an important issue in the newly established Corinthian church. Paul reacts strongly to the news that there is division in the congregation in which people now align themselves strongly with several different Christian leaders. Paul reminds his audience that first and foremost, they are followers of Christ, not followers of Paul, Apollos, or Peter (*1 Cor. 1:10–12*). His argument for unity is based on the undividable Christ, His sacrifice, and His saving grace (*1 Cor. 1:13*). We will return to the issue of identity in the Corinthian church in a future lesson, focusing on it in more detail.

Part III: Life Application

Many businesses today spend time and money on the question of branding and self-identity. They realize that, in the competitive business world, just doing what they have always done will not guarantee survival. They need to have a clear vision of who they are and of the unique needs they can meet. Paul, too, seems to have known the importance of identity.

- 1. In your group, explore Paul’s self-identification as an apostle. What did this identity mean, and what right did he have to claim this distinction for himself? How did his apostleship affect his life’s purpose and mission?**

2. Ponder and discuss how our individual, and corporate, identity as Seventh-day Adventist Christians can help us discover, and meet, the needs of our communities.

3. The church at Corinth was a unique cultural blend. Most of the group did not have a Jewish cultural background. They could not be identified as a Jewish offshoot or sect. This lack of a clear identity underlies many of the problems that Paul addresses in the Corinthian church. In your group, discuss the relationship between identity and behavior. Why does knowing who we are, where we come from, and where we are going influence what we do and how we live?

4. Finally, how can we maintain a Christian identity in a world that emphasizes different values and ideals?

The Message of the Cross



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Cor. 1:17–31, Col. 1:20, 1 Pet. 2:24, Acts 13:16–47, 1 Cor. 2:1–5.*

Memory Text: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (*1 Corinthians 1:18, NIV*).

Cicero, a pagan Roman writer and orator, had told the Roman people to not even think about the cross, so abhorrent was it as a means of death. Although Cicero died about a half century before Jesus was born, his statement illustrates the contempt with which the Romans had held the cross. It was so bad that they should not even think about it.

In contrast, Paul would write: “The message of the cross . . . is the power of God” (*1 Cor. 1:18, NIV*). For Paul, the Cross is the instrument of reconciliation between God and man (*Eph. 2:16, Col. 1:20*), the supreme symbol of Jesus’ humility (*Phil. 2:8*), and the place where our immense debt was paid (*Col. 2:14*).

The Cross is Paul’s answer to the problems in Corinth. You don’t have to go very far in 1 Corinthians to realize that he is very concerned about one major issue: divisions in the church. Paul is so perplexed that right after the greetings (*1 Cor. 1:1–3*) and the thanksgiving section (*1 Cor. 1:4–9*), this is the first topic he addresses (*1 Cor. 1:10–17*). This week, we will turn to the powerful message of the Cross as the answer to this problem and to other issues in Corinth.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 11.

The Gospel of the Cross

Paul says that the message of the Cross is the power of God to us. It is not surprising that “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” is the center of his preaching (*1 Cor. 2:2, NKJV*).

Read 1 Corinthians 1:17–31. What important point is Paul making here?

In 1 Corinthians 1:18–31, Paul deals with a contrast between human foolishness and divine wisdom. The Cross has the power to display the worst of man and the best of God. This section of 1 Corinthians is introduced by the statement in 1 Corinthians 1:17. Because the cross of Christ is not supposed to be emptied of its power (*1 Cor. 1:17*), the message of the Cross must occupy the central place of our preaching (*see also 1 Cor. 2:2*).

Paul says that he was sent not to baptize, but to preach the gospel of the Cross. This statement requires two important observations. First, the Greek verb translated as “to send” is *apostellō*, which stems from the same root as the word “apostle.” Thus, Paul’s fundamental apostolic task was the proclamation of the gospel. Second, Paul’s words about baptism did not mean that baptism was not important, or at least not as important as preaching. He was, instead, rebuking those who made a big deal out of who were the ones doing the baptizing as opposed to the One, Jesus, into whom they have been baptized.

By “wisdom of words” (*1 Cor. 1:17*), Paul is not implying that eloquent speeches are bad in themselves. The point is that human wisdom should not obscure the message of the Cross. This phrase refers to Greco-Roman rhetoric. In Athens, Paul used logic, science, and philosophy, but this resulted in little fruit. So, “he decided to follow another plan of labor in Corinth in his efforts to arrest the attention of the careless and the indifferent. He determined to avoid elaborate arguments and discussions, and ‘not to know anything’ among the Corinthians ‘save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.’”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 244.

In what ways can elaborate discourses obscure the message of the Cross? Why did the proclamation of Jesus Christ and Him crucified produce more fruit in Corinth than logic, science, and philosophy did in Athens? Might there, however, be times that logic, philosophy, and science could be helpful in proclaiming the gospel?

Foolishness to Those Who Are Perishing

In contrasting human foolishness to divine wisdom, Paul states that the “message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing” (*1 Cor. 1:18, NKJV*). This is the first of six references to foolishness or foolish in 1 Corinthians 1:18–31.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:20, 21, 23, 25, and 27. How do these references to foolishness help us understand what Paul meant when saying that the message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing?

The Greek word for “foolishness” in 1 Corinthians 1:18 is *mōria*. This word occurs only five times in the New Testament, and all in 1 Corinthians (*1 Cor. 1:18, 21, 23; 1 Cor. 2:14; 1 Cor. 3:19*). Apart from *mōria*, other words from the same family occur numerous times in the New Testament.

The reference to foolishness in 1 Corinthians 1:18, 23 is not denigrating the Corinthians’ intellectual capacity but directing attention to their unwillingness to consider the truth of the gospel. As a result, Paul also had to confront immoral behavior and thought, lack of discernment, and even rebellion against God.

Think about Paul’s situation in this city. He comes to a place that prides itself on its own so-called knowledge and wisdom and cultural sophistication. And, in this context, he talks about a Galilean Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified by the Romans and then raised from the dead—all in order to pay for not only their sins but for the sins of the world. *Can this guy be serious? Who was he kidding?* This wasn’t some deep new philosophical concept, either, that could be parsed and analyzed by philosophical tools; it seemed to be lunacy, nonsense, nothing that any smart and educated Corinthian could take seriously.

And, as foolish as Paul’s message sounded to the pagans, for many of the Jews, the message of the Cross sounded worse. What Jew was expecting a Messiah to be executed by Rome? The Messiah was supposed to overthrow the Romans, not be crucified by them.

Thus, from the start, Paul had a lot going against him in Corinth. And yet, despite all this, souls—Jewish and Gentile—were won to the gospel.

The message here?

Whatever opposition we face, God has people who are open to hearing the truth. We must be ready to be used by Him to reach these people wherever they are, even in places today that are as bad as, or even worse than, Corinth was.

Power to Those Who Are Being Saved

The message of 1 Corinthians 1:18 is too clear for one to miss the point. What the Cross means depends on the way one looks at it. It is foolishness for those in rebellion against God, but it is power for those who long for His salvation.

Read Colossians 1:20 and 1 Peter 2:24. What did Jesus accomplish for us on the cross?

As we have already seen, in preaching the gospel, one must avoid “words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (*1 Cor. 1:17, ESV*). In light of 1 Corinthians 1:17, it becomes easier to understand why the opposite of foolishness is the power of God and not human wisdom (*1 Cor. 1:18*). The Cross, which is so contrary to human wisdom, reveals just how foolish human wisdom really is.

The Greek text of 1 Corinthians 1:18 suggests that “those who are perishing” (*NKJV*) are receiving the result of their actions. The text can read like this: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are destroying themselves.” The Greek verb *apollymi* (“to perish”) can also mean “to destroy” (*John 10:10*). In fact, *apollymi* is translated as “destroy” in 1 Corinthians 1:19.

What is happening here? Paul provides a biblical foundation for this statement in verse 18, about these people perishing, by quoting in verse 19 God’s words in Isaiah 29:14. In verse 19, God is the one behind the destruction, which seems to contradict the self-destroying pride mentioned right before. However, there is no contradiction. The idea is that God will destroy that which already is destroying itself.

In contrast to those being destroyed, the phrase “to us who are being saved” (*1 Cor. 1:18, NKJV*) indicates that salvation comes only from God. Paul is saying that we are being saved; that is, we are not saving ourselves. We, of course, can’t. Our salvation has an external source. While destruction is self-caused, salvation can only be granted, a gift of grace to sinners. As is clear in 1 Corinthians 1:21, it is God who saves those who believe. Foolishness, in this sense, is the act of rejecting what God has offered humanity through the cross of Christ (*1 Cor. 1:30*), thus bringing destruction upon oneself.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Rom. 6:23, NKJV*). In what ways does this verse restate what Paul was saying in 1 Corinthians 1:18, 19?

A Messiah Crucified

Paul wrote that the “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom” (*1 Cor. 1:22, ESV*). The Cross—the idea of God, the Messiah, being crucified—was not a sign that the Jews had expected. Nor was it the kind of wisdom that the Greeks wanted. It went against everyone’s expectations.

In fact, all one has to do is read how the disciples reacted to the idea of Jesus being crucified (*see Mark 8:31, 32; Mark 9:30–32; and Mark 10:32–34*) to begin to see how alien, and repulsive, the whole notion was, especially to the Jews. As said before, the Jews expected the Messiah to conquer the Romans; that is not what happened, at least not in the worldly military sense of “conquer.”

For centuries, the cross has been, for Christians, a symbol of faith. It is hard for twenty-first-century Christians to understand how crazy the idea of a crucified God was for the first-century mindset.

However, it is precisely because this was such a shocking message that makes it worthy of our most profound reflections. The portrait of a crucified Messiah makes it entirely clear to the whole universe how far God was willing to go to complete the plan of redemption. The idea of the cross itself, and of the Lord’s dying on the cross, is astonishing enough to us, sinners here on earth. (Imagine, though, what it must have meant to the sinless beings who knew, and worshiped, the Lord Jesus in heaven!)

Read Acts 13:16–47 (especially verses 26, 38, and 47). What does this passage teach us about the meaning of the Cross?

Paul says Christ sent him to preach the gospel. And so Paul preaches the message of a crucified Messiah (*1 Cor. 1:23*). He resumes these ideas in 1 Corinthians 2:1–5. The apostle was faithful to Christ’s commission. In proclaiming the gospel, he didn’t employ “lofty speech or wisdom” (*1 Cor. 2:1, ESV*); instead, he focused only on “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (*1 Cor. 2:2, ESV*). His speech and message “were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (*1 Cor. 2:4, ESV*) because, in fact, “the wisdom of men” stands in visible contrast with “the power of God” (*2 Cor. 2:5, ESV*).

A crucified Messiah was something completely unexpected by the Jews and the Greeks. What does this tell us about the fact that God does not always act the way we expect? Why is this an important concept to grasp, especially when things don’t go as we have expected?

Christ, the Power and Wisdom of God

In 1 Corinthians 1:19, 20, 30, and 31, Paul talks about how God’s wisdom and human wisdom are incredibly different and, thus, mutually exclusive. Notice that Paul does not reject wisdom as such, but he rejects the kind of human wisdom that tries to compete with God. Human wisdom is incapable of freeing men from sin. Only Christ, the wisdom of God, can perform this work. See the table below.

but to us who are being saved	[the message of the Cross] is the power of God	1 Cor. 1:18 (NKJV)
but to those who are called	Christ [is] the power of God	1 Cor. 1:24 (NKJV)

Both 1 Corinthians 1:18 and 1 Corinthians 1:24 show that Christ is the power of God, in the sense that He has the power to save people from their sins. Indeed, “it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21, NKJV). The phrases “us who are being saved” (1 Cor. 1:18, NKJV), “those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21, NKJV), and “those who are called” (1 Cor. 1:24, NKJV) refer to the same group, namely, people living the experience of salvation through faith. “The gospel of Christ . . . is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16, NKJV).

Christ is not only the power but also the wisdom of God. This means that through Him God faced and solved the problem of sin, a problem that human wisdom was powerless to solve. The wisdom of this world is unable to make people know God (1 Cor. 1:21). Conversely, through Christ we become wise for salvation (2 Tim. 3:15).

Read 1 Corinthians 1:24–29. Notice the words there, such as “foolishness,” “weak,” “power,” and “wise.” What point is he making?

In reading 1 Corinthians 1:24–29, one should also notice the terms *foolish* (or *foolishness*) and *weak* (or *weakness*). The point is that human wisdom may consider the message of the Cross to be foolishness and weakness. However, “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor. 1:25, ESV). This doesn’t mean that God is weak or foolish; it’s merely an expression showing how God’s power and wisdom far exceed anything human.

Dwell on the words “that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called” (1 Cor. 1:26, NKJV). What message is there for us?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Calvary,” pp. 741–757, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“To the minds of multitudes living at the present time, the cross of Calvary is surrounded by sacred memories. Hallowed associations are connected with the scenes of the crucifixion. But in Paul’s day the cross was regarded with feelings of repulsion and horror. To uphold as the Saviour of mankind one who had met death on the cross, would naturally call forth ridicule and opposition.

“Paul well knew how his message would be regarded by both the Jews and the Greeks of Corinth. . . . Among his Jewish hearers there were many who would be angered by the message he was about to proclaim. In the estimation of the Greeks his words would be absurd folly. He would be looked upon as weak-minded for attempting to show how the cross could have any connection with the elevation of the race or the salvation of mankind.

“But to Paul the cross was the one object of supreme interest. Ever since he had been arrested in his career of persecution against the followers of the crucified Nazarene he had never ceased to glory in the cross. At that time there had been given him a revelation of the infinite love of God, as revealed in the death of Christ; and a marvelous transformation had been wrought in his life, bringing all his plans and purposes into harmony with heaven. . . . He knew by personal experience that when a sinner once beholds the love of the Father, as seen in the sacrifice of His Son, and yields to the divine influence, a change of heart takes place, and henceforth Christ is all and in all.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 245, 246.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me” (*Matt. 26:39, NKJV*). What does this prayer say about the immense price Jesus paid on the cross?
- 2** Paul says, “The foolishness of God is wiser than men” (*1 Cor. 1:25, NKJV*). In what ways is the wisdom of God so different from human wisdom?
- 3** The message of a crucified Christ was a stumbling block for the Jews and foolishness for the Greeks. What biblical themes that we preach today can produce the same effect in modern audiences, and why?
- 4** Paul says that “the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God” (*1 Cor. 2:14, NKJV*). So, how can we speak about Jesus to these people in a way that could touch their hearts? Or maybe our actions alone will reach them.

A Touch That Transforms

By VYACHESLAV DEMYAN

Fabiola lived in the peaceful surroundings of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, yet peace was the last thing she felt. A breast cancer diagnosis had shaken her world, and with the added fear of COVID-19 spreading across the country, death felt closer than ever.

Meanwhile, in the city of Salvador, Luisa's world was collapsing. A betrayal shattered her marriage of 23 years, leaving her to discover she had contracted syphilis from her husband. Additionally, her mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and she witnessed a neighbor take her own life. The thought haunted her—maybe she should do the same.

Both women were drowning in their suffering. Like the woman who had bled for 12 years in the biblical story of Mark chapter 5, Fabiola and Luisa were desperate for physical, emotional, and spiritual healing. They each needed a touch of hope.

On two separate evenings, God intervened in a surprisingly similar way. As Fabiola tried to escape her anxiety by watching TV, her small dog hopped onto her lap, accidentally stepping on the remote and switching the channel to Novo Tempo, Hope Channel in Brazil.

Some 800 miles away, Luisa's dog did the same thing. In Fabiola and Luisa's darkest moments, one divinely placed paw on a remote revealed the life-changing love of a Savior.

Both women felt a wave of hope wash over them.

Today, Fabiola has found renewed purpose, encouraging those around her with the same message of comfort she received. The messages from Novo Tempo reshaped her outlook on her illness. She no longer saw cancer as a punishment but as a part of something God allowed to help transform her. Now, as she waits for her medical appointments, she shares Christian books, speaks of Jesus, and encourages those around her with the hope she found.

For Luisa, the programs she watched helped her recognize she was battling depression. She was able to receive treatment that became her turning point, helping her emerge from darkness into the light of God's love.

"I was that lost, dirty, empty daughter," she reflects. "But [after His touch], I never want to leave His presence."

Hope Channel exists for people like Fabiola and Luisa—people searching for hope, for healing, for Jesus. Thousands are waiting to be reached. Eighty-four Hope Channels around the world are reaching people through life-changing content, offering Bible studies, and connecting seekers with Christ.

When you give to the mission offering during Sabbath School or choose mission on your tithe envelope, a portion of that offering helps fund Hope Channel's important ministry around the world. Thank you for your generous support.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *1 Corinthians 1:18*

Study Focus: *1 Cor. 1:17–31.*

Introduction

When faced with a towering wall of flames amid a wildfire, one's first thought probably would not be to apply more fire to the already extremely dangerous situation. As foolish as this action may seem, firefighters often do exactly that. A fire needs oxygen and fuel, such as dry vegetation or flammable structures, in order to keep burning. If one can cut off either the oxygen supply or the fuel supply, the fire can be brought under control. Firefighters often use this technique, known as "backfiring," to halt or redirect a fire.

Fighting fire with fire seems to go counter to reason, or appears even foolish, when faced with a fast-moving wall of fire, pushing quickly toward a town or settlement. Yet, when done appropriately and carefully, this strategy can make the difference between survival and destruction by fire.

In the same way, Paul's exaltation of Christ's sacrifice on the cross went against the sentiment of his day. In the introduction to his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul highlights the countercultural nature of the Christian message of the Cross, which is something that most of us living in Western, or Christian, contexts will struggle to understand. Most of us grew up in a world in which crosses on churches or in other public spaces were shorthand for Christianity and the message of salvation.

But the cross meant cruel death, severe punishment, and absolute shame to most people living in the first-century A.D. Greco-Roman world. Yet, contrary to the popular thinking of that time, Paul taught that the gospel of Jesus Christ was the power of God to those who accepted it (*1 Cor. 1:18, ESV*).

Lesson Themes

This week's lesson highlights a number of important themes, including:

- 1. The Message of the Cross.** The cross is God's surprising, and all-encompassing, answer to the sin problem. It is the foundation of the gospel message preached by Paul and the other apostles to a world that had a radically different worldview.
- 2. True Wisdom.** Wisdom was an important element of Greek philosophy and a major topic in distinct philosophical schools. Paul's use of the term stands in stark contrast to its use in Greek philosophy and connects more easily to the understanding of wisdom in the Old Testament.

3. The Cross: Folly or a Way Home. The cross becomes either a stumbling block or folly to those who hear about it without embracing the One who hung there. Jesus died on the cross in order to offer the world forgiveness, transformative grace, and a way home to the God who invests all to save His fallen creation.

Part II: Commentary

1. Background: The Hellenistic concept of wisdom (*sofia*) in the New Testament period emphasized intelligence and theoretical knowledge over practical skills. A philosopher was a “lover of wisdom,” someone who understood and disseminated knowledge about the natural world and the human experience. Truth could be ordered into a general system that could help explain the world. Quite a number of differing Greek philosophical schools, with distinct emphases, existed during the time, but they all focused on observation, reason, logic, and intellectual arguments, even though they were not devoid of ethical concerns.

Six major Greco-Roman philosophical schools should be distinguished: the school of Pythagoras; the school of Plato and his successors; Aristotle’s peripatetic school; the school of Epicurus that emphasized imperturbability as the ideal; the cynics (emphasizing simplicity and freedom from societal conventions); and the school of the Stoics, which, during the time of the events of the New Testament, was known as Roman stoicism (or Late Stoa) and became the most influential school of philosophy during that time (see John T. Fitzgerald, “Greco-Roman Philosophical Schools,” in *The World of the New Testament*, eds. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013], pp. 135–148).

In the Old Testament, wisdom is not limited to knowledge, or the integration of knowledge into a coherent system; rather, it describes the ability of a person to make right use of knowledge that is relationally connected to God. This knowledge is, thus, God-given and results in making ethical (i.e., “good,” echoing Creation language) decisions. Exodus 31:1–5 uses three key terms of wisdom language (*hokmah*, “wisdom;” *binah*, “intelligence;” and *da’at*, “knowledge”) to describe the divinely given skill that the artist Bezalel needed to create the tabernacle and its utensils. The use of these terms in this particular context helps us to understand that wisdom in the Old Testament is practical and goes beyond a mere intellectual endeavor.

The Old Testament authors ask big questions about God’s justice and how humans can obtain true wisdom, even though they recognize that not all our questions, nor our search for wisdom, will lead always to clear

answers (for example, *Prov. 20:24; Job 28:20, 21*). Wisdom literature in the Old Testament includes the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and selected wisdom psalms (for example, *Psalms 37, 49, 73*).

The discovery of a significant corpus of wisdom literature, emphasizing knowledge among the writings from the Khirbet Qumran community in the first century B.C. (also known as Dead Sea Scrolls), highlights the fact that discussions about wisdom were an important element of intellectual and philosophical discussions among Jewish communities prior to the arrival of the Messiah in Palestine (see J. I. Kampen, “Wisdom Literature at Qumran,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, eds. C. A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000], pp. 1263–1268).

2. Foolishness and Wisdom: Following his initial greetings, thanksgiving, and exhortation to unity, Paul begins his message to the young church in Corinth by focusing on foolishness and wisdom. First Corinthians 1:18–31 is a rhetorical high point of the New Testament. Paul’s thesis statement to the Corinthians suggests that the gospel is folly to some, while it represents the saving power of God to others (*1 Cor. 1:18*). This paradox is significant, as it suggests; and as Paul points out in later chapters, the weakness of humanity is really an opportunity for God to display His strength.

The remainder of the passage offers a number of contrasts between wise and foolish, God and the world, strong and weak. The cross, an instrument of cruel Roman torture and death, has become the means by which God accomplished salvation. This argument, which underlies all the preaching of Paul and the early Christian church, must have felt countercultural and paradoxical to many newly converted Gentile believers. The “word of the cross” (*1 Cor. 1:18, ESV*) is shorthand for the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, offering salvation for those who have heard and believed in that word. We get a hint of the sense of the folly that any Greco-Roman audience would have perceived in this message: How could God save people (and the world) through the death of a crucified convicted felon? Jews, on the other hand, would perceive this message as a “stumbling block” (*ESV*), or Greek *skandalon*, as noted in 1 Corinthians 1:23. This stumbling block, on the one hand, or foolishness, on the other hand, refers metaphorically to an obstacle to one’s faith.

3. The Good News of the Cross: Right from the outset, Paul argues that the message of the cross is the power of God to those being saved. The cross offers believers the key to understanding God’s wisdom of offering salvation to those who do not deserve righteousness nor can ever attain it. The cross is also more than a sign or symbol, though Jews do not recognize it as such, even though they yearn to see miraculous signs (*Matt.*

12:38, 39; Mark 8:11, 12; also 1 Cor. 1:22). The desire to see signs and wonders reflects a basic spiritual blindness, and perhaps even a hardness of heart, by those who “demand” (not “ask for”) them. The gospel of the crucified and risen Christ does not elicit faith in Jews or Greeks but, rather, becomes to them a “stumbling block” or “folly,” respectively. Paul summarizes this reality in 1 Corinthians 1:25: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (*ESV*).

This pronouncement leads Paul to the next important statement: God’s election of those making up the church in Corinth was based not on their wisdom or their power and influence, but solely on God’s sovereignty (*1 Cor. 1:26–29*). God’s choice is never based on human accomplishments, power, or influence but happens in response to our grasping the hand of Jesus by faith. Sometimes we can grab the entire hand, while at other times we barely manage to hang on to the tip of the little finger of His hand—yet, rest assured, we can trust that we are in the center of God’s grace. This knowledge, according to Paul, saves us also from boasting about our own “faith accomplishments.” And “ ‘let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’ ” (*1 Cor. 1:31, ESV, referring to Jer. 9:23, 24*). Intriguingly (and perhaps anticipated already in the personification of wisdom in Proverbs 8 in the Old Testament), Jesus Christ is the personified wisdom from God, His righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (*1 Cor. 1:30*).

Part III: Life Application

Wisdom and folly are found closely linked in Paul’s opening chapter to the church in Corinth. He helps his readers understand that “human wisdom cannot lead to a true saving knowledge of God, which is only available through the foolishness of the gospel (v. 21).”—“1 Corinthians,” in *Andrews Bible Commentary*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez et al. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), p. 1620. Discuss with your group the following questions as you consider 1 Corinthians 1:17–31:

- 1. What could be a stumbling block to our faith, though we have the advantage of being able to look back on nearly two thousand years of church history and the history of biblical interpretation?**

2. What would be the best argument to make to those who consider the gospel message foolish or just a “sedative for the ignorant”?

3. What aspect, or aspects, of the good news of the Cross would appeal to people in your community, outside the church? What would make accepting the gospel more difficult for them?

Notes



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.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *1 Corinthians 1:10*

Study Focus: *1 Cor. 1:10–17, 1 Cor. 3:18–23, Phil. 2:1–8.*

Introduction

In a small town, a group of volunteers came together to rebuild a community center after a storm. The foundation was strong, and the materials were good. They had bricks, mortar, tools—everything they needed.

But, as work began, disagreements broke out. One team insisted, “Bricks should be stacked this way—it’s more efficient.” Another team argued, “No, we’ve always done it *this* way!” Some workers refused to take instructions from others, saying, “We follow the lead of our crew chief only.” A few even walked off the worksite, saying, “If that group is involved, we want no part of this work.”

By the end of the day, what should have been a solid wall was a patchwork mess—some bricks crooked, others missing, and the whole structure unstable. A light push could have knocked it over. An old mason walked by, shook his head, and said, “A brick alone is just a rock. But bricks working together, with mortar holding them in place—that’s a wall. That’s strength.”

Just like those bricks, the church in Corinth—and today—can stand strong only when it is united in Christ, the foundation. Division weakens the body. But when we set aside pride and follow Christ’s model of servanthood, we become something unshakable.

Lesson Themes

In the early church, one of the greatest threats to unity wasn’t persecution—it was pride. Two main themes related to this issue can be found in this week’s passages. They can be briefly summarized as follows:

- 1. The Threat of Personality Cults.** In 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses how believers were dividing themselves based on loyalty to different leaders—forming personality cults around Paul, Apollos, and Cephas. These factions turned gifted leadership into a source of division, distracting the church from its true foundation: Christ.
- 2. The Power of Christlike Servanthood.** In contrast, Philippians 2:1–8 offers the antidote: Christlike humility. Paul urges believers to lay down selfish ambition and look not to their own interests, but to the interests of others. He points to Jesus, who, though equal with the Father, took the form of a servant, humbled Himself, and became obedient to death. That is the true model of unity: sacrificial love.

Together, these passages call the church to reject pride and power plays and instead pursue unity through servant-hearted humility, following the example of Christ.

Part II: Commentary

1. Background: Slavery was an unfortunate reality in the world of the New Testament. The Greek terminology used in the New Testament does not clearly distinguish between “servant” (for example, an employee under a superior who performs specific tasks and receives payment for that task) and “slave.” The correct translation of the Greek term *doulos*, “servant, slave,” for example, could be either “servant” or “slave” and depended on the specific context. Historians estimate that as many as twelve million people were enslaved in the Roman Empire during the first century A.D.—between 16 and 20 percent of the entire population of at least sixty million (see S. Scott Bartchy, “Slaves and Slavery in the Roman World,” in *The World of the New Testament*, eds. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013], p. 170).

Slaves were often valued members of a larger household and sometimes held responsible positions in the household. Distinct from the practice of slavery in the New World, neither skin color nor ethnic/racial origins indicated slave status in the population of the Roman Empire. Roman law governed the treatment of slaves carefully, and many slaves could expect to be set free by their owners later in life. Nonetheless, slavery was not a benevolent institution. Many slaves suffered terribly under cruel masters and experienced all types of abuses.

The fact that several New Testament passages use terminology and imagery associated with slavery suggests its importance for those seeking to understand the cultural background of the New Testament: “Three keywords in Paul’s vocabulary—‘redemption,’ ‘justification,’ and ‘reconciliation’—draw directly on the process and results of manumission from slavery,” notes Bartchy (see Bartchy, “Slaves and Slavery in the Roman World,” in *The World of the New Testament*, p. 176). Such terminology and concepts helped readers to make sense of important theological concepts, including one that describes the release of the believer from the slavery of sin and alienation from God.

2. Personality Cults—Threats to Unity: Threats to unity come in many different shapes and forms, and Paul deals with some of them early on in his letter. Long before the days of social-media influencers, sports superstars, megachurch pastors, super-rich billionaires, or charismatic world leaders, people were already following their favorite spiritual leader.

Following different spiritual leaders in the context of a church community can lead to arguments and often results in divisions. These divisions may further splinter into antagonistic groups at loggerheads with one another. In the church of Corinth, there seems to have been several groups supporting different leaders.

First Corinthians 1:12 mentions several names. Some claimed to be followers of Apollos. Apollos was a Jewish Christian and a native of Alexandria, “an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures” (*Acts 18:24, ESV*). He must have been a good speaker and preacher who impressed his audiences with his rhetoric and his enthusiasm for preaching Jesus (*Acts 18:25*). Apollos had helped build up the church in Corinth while Paul was in Ephesus (*Acts 19:1, 2*); yet, prior to that, it seems as if he had not heard about the baptism of the Spirit (*Acts 18:25*).

Others claimed allegiance to Cephas, which is the Aramaic form of the name Peter. Peter was the first of the apostles to minister to non-Jews (*Acts 10*) and, because of his leadership role among the apostles, seemed to be regarded by many as the main Christian leader or figurehead of the movement. Others claimed to follow Paul. Although they seemed to have different approaches to mission, it is interesting to note that these leaders went out of their way to support, not criticize, one another’s work (*see, for example, Peter’s support of Paul in 2 Peter 3:15 and Paul’s endorsement of Apollos’s work in 1 Corinthians 3:4–7*).

However, we also should note that they were willing to engage each other critically if a particular issue called for it. Paul’s engagement with Peter regarding the important issue of fellowship with Gentile believers and the question of the relevance and importance of ritual laws and righteousness by faith (*see Gal. 2:11–21*) offers a good example. Despite the strong bonds connecting the different leaders of the early church, some believers still managed to play these different leaders’ teachings against each other to create division.

Paul’s suggested solution can be found in 1 Corinthians 3:18–23. Paul highlights the danger of self-deception for his Corinthian readers. They considered themselves “wise” and did not understand that divine wisdom appears as foolishness to unconverted minds. He quotes two Old Testament texts (*Job 5:13 and Ps. 94:11*) to bolster his argument, and then he comments on the various factions. Rather than engaging in the debate about who was more theologically sound or a more worthy influencer, Paul highlights every member’s need to keep Christ at the center of his or her spiritual life and not let any leader, no matter how eloquent or good, take the place that belongs to Christ. “Let no one boast in men” (*1 Cor. 3:21, ESV*), he suggests, for “you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (*1 Cor. 3:23, ESV*). Finding our identity and home in Christ helps avoid divisions.

3. Christlike Servanthood: Most of us don’t really understand adequately

the term “servant” as used in the New Testament. Philippians 2:1–8 offers a helpful model of servanthood within the context of unity. Paul emphasizes to his readers the importance of unity. The semantic force of the four conditional “if” clauses in Philippians 2:1 should really be understood “as an appeal based on the certainty (‘since there is’) of the spiritual realities expressed . . . in the Christian life.”—“Philippians,” in *Andrews Bible Commentary*, ed. Ángel M. Rodríguez et al. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), p. 1730. Paul then shares his personal hope and joy that the church should be “of the same mind, having the same love, being of one accord, and one mind” (*Phil. 2:2, ESV*), which ultimately means that his readers would not seek their own interests but be focused on the interests of others (*Phil. 2:4*).

The next section uses the example of Jesus as a model for the church. Church members are to imitate the full surrender of Jesus as they relate to one another. Theologians refer to this text to describe Christ in His pre-incarnation (*Phil. 2:6, 7*), during His incarnation on earth (*Phil. 2:7, 8*), and His exaltation after His resurrection (*Phil. 2:9–11*). Jesus became a *doulos*, a servant or slave. He “emptied himself” (*Phil. 2:7, ESV*) or “made Himself of no reputation” (*NKJV*). He voluntarily decided not to use His power and divine attributes so that He would be able to be the “servant of God” and save this planet that was in rebellion. “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 2:5, NKJV*) is Paul’s reminder to us that we, too, should imitate His love—imperfect though it will be in the person of frail and sinful human beings—as we relate to our faith community.

Part III: Life Application

Unity (or the lack thereof) was a major topic in the Corinthian church and is also an ever-present issue within Seventh-day Adventism. Some of us follow our favorite speaker on social media or spend significant time watching videos of our preferred ministry. Often our conflicts involve differences in our understanding of biblical truth, or we encounter personality clashes among the leadership. Paul’s message to the Corinthians reminds us that this conflict is nothing new. Servant leadership is an often-heard phrase; yet, we struggle to apply its principles to ourselves and the way we relate to one another.

- 1. How can we avoid the trap of disunity because of factions within the church?**

2. What strategies can we find in Scripture to help us focus on Jesus as the center of our faith and of our church community?

3. The root of many conflicts is our different understandings of biblical truth. We claim we love truth and are committed to truth. So, how can we relate to others whose understanding of Scripture is distinct from ours? What can we learn from the One who claimed to be “the way, the truth, and the life”?

4. Why is it so difficult to follow Christ’s example of perfect servanthood?

5. What biblical strategies and practical steps would help to bring more unity into our churches?

Sin in the Church



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Cor. 5:1–13, 2 Cor. 2:5–10, 1 Cor. 6:1–13, 1 Thess. 4:1–8, 1 Cor. 6:19–7:9.*

Memory Text: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies” (*1 Corinthians 6:19, 20, NIV*).

Our brains are like sponges: whatever is brought to them, via our senses, stays in them. We might not be conscious of most of what comes in (we'd be unable to think clearly if we did remember everything), but it's all there, and, to some degree, impacts what we think, feel, and do.

That's why it's so easy for us, even as Christians, to be impacted by all the bad things around us. The Christian church, from the start, has struggled with this problem. Where, for instance, did Sunday keeping come from? Did the church just pull it out of the air? Of course not. It came from the culture around it.

And we can see this principle unfolding here in Corinth. After an appeal against factionalism (*1 Corinthians 1–4*), Paul now turns to issues related to sexual immorality, lawsuits, prostitution, marriage, and singleness (*1 Corinthians 5–7*). The standards of the world affected them extensively. The factionalism portrayed in *1 Corinthians 1–4* opened the door for the moral behavior denounced in the ensuing chapters. How does Paul seek to address this sin in the church, and what lessons can we take from what he wrote?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 25.

Dissonance Between Faith and Practice

Throughout Christian history, theologians, pastors, and laypeople have studied the New Testament in order to determine what the church should look like. We marvel, for instance, at the church of Acts. But we quickly lose sight of one significant element: people have problems. It seems that we can also read the New Testament to see what the Bible says about what a church should not look like. Paul’s letters to the Corinthians are a good starting point.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1–13. What scandalous situation does Paul describe in this passage, and why is it so disturbing?

The expression “his father’s wife” (*1 Cor. 5:1*) suggests that Paul refers to the incestuous relationship between a man and his stepmother. This situation was probably reported “by those of Chloe’s household” (*1 Cor. 1:11, NKJV*). Incest was reputed as such a terrible sin that it was “not tolerated even among pagans” (*1 Cor. 5:1, ESV*). And yet, it is now happening in an early Christian church? Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 5:1, 2 show that he is in shock at the report that a church member was doing this.

However, this bad situation gets worse. Paul is more stunned when realizing that, rather than feeling sorry about the situation, the Corinthians were even proud of themselves for tolerating such a sin (*1 Cor. 5:1, 2, NIV*). Thus, he intends to correct not only the immoral man but also the church for its apparent dissonance between faith and practice. In fact, Paul makes it clear constantly that the church’s indulgent attitude toward the incestuous man demanded a correction. But being proud of such a sexual scandal, and even boasting of it (*1 Cor. 5:2, 6*)! This was too much for Paul to bear. What was wrong with these people?

We don’t have an explanation for why the church in Corinth was so tolerant of the incestuous man. Perhaps he was a wealthy member from whom the church benefited? Or, maybe, because “all things are lawful” (*1 Cor. 6:12*), they didn’t deem it the way that they should have. We just don’t know.

Whatever the true reasons, they became blind to a flagrant violation of the Scriptures (*Lev. 18:7, 8*). And they were even proud of it.

What things are clearly condemned in Scripture that we, as a church, are in danger of tolerating, all in the name of “love” and “acceptance”?

Dealing With Scandals

Dealing with matters of sexuality is always hard. It was hard for Paul, and it is for us, too. In these situations, we must be faithful to the Scriptures and address the issue with prayer and love. We must never forget that our goal is restoration.

Read again 1 Corinthians 5:1–13. How does Paul tell them to deal with this situation?

Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 5 that sexual scandals require church discipline. He says that the incestuous man should be removed (*1 Cor. 5:2*), judged (*1 Cor. 5:3*), delivered to Satan (*1 Cor. 5:5*), and “put away” (*1 Cor. 5:13, NKJV*). The church members were told “not to associate with” him (*1 Cor. 5:9, 11, ESV*), nor “even to eat with such a one” (*1 Cor. 5:11, ESV*). Paul employs strong language that may sound offensive to modern ears, but his words must be understood in their historical context. Also, one must remember that he is dealing with a flagrant, sinful lifestyle. Usually, in extreme situations, strong language is necessary. In any case, a brief explanation of some expressions is helpful.

“**Let him . . . be removed from among you**” (*1 Cor. 5:2, ESV; also 1 Cor. 5:13*). This refers to church discipline.

“**Deliver this man to Satan**” (*1 Cor. 5:5, ESV*). Because this man did not choose to be under the protection of God by living in obedience to Him, he would be vulnerable to Satan. So, this expression can merely mean something like “Let him reap the fruit of his decisions.”

“**Not to associate**” (*1 Cor. 5:9, 11, NASB*), “**not even to eat with such a one**” (*1 Cor. 5:11, RSV*). Close association with sexually immoral people was considered dangerous because they might influence others to imitate their conduct. In ancient times, sharing a meal could mean sharing values, as well. We are all susceptible to the influences that are around us, and we need to protect ourselves the best we can, especially in dealing with something like this.

“**That his spirit may be saved**” (*1 Cor. 5:5, NASB*). Church discipline is rehabilitative. It intends to bring sinners back to their senses and cause them to abandon their sinful lifestyles. This is possibly what Paul meant by “destruction of the flesh” (*1 Cor. 5:5*). It is possible, too, that the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5 is the repentant man referred to later (*see 2 Cor. 2:5–10*). Church discipline reaches its purpose when the erring member is reintegrated into church fellowship.

Protecting the Church's Identity

In 1 Corinthians 6:1–11, Paul continues his discussion on how Christians should approach issues involving people in the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:3, 12, 13 and 1 Corinthians 6:1–13. What is Paul trying to teach the Corinthians and us?

The Greek word *pragma* in 1 Corinthians 6:1, translated as “matter” in the New King James Version, is a generic term meaning “thing.” Here, it refers to a legal matter. It is important to remember that 1 Corinthians 6:1–11 does not refer to a criminal case. The authority of civil courts for criminal matters is affirmed in Romans 13:1–5. Paul addresses a case of litigation right after a case of sexual immorality, just as Moses did in Deuteronomy 22:22–24. This demonstrates how much Paul’s manner of dealing with problems in the church is based upon the Scriptures.

The fact that the case in 1 Corinthians 6:1–11 is bracketed by passages that deal with sexual immorality (*1 Corinthians 5, 1 Cor. 6:12–20*) may suggest that the “matter” in 1 Corinthians 6:1 regards sexual immorality, too. We don’t know for sure what the case is, whether a minor civil issue, such as a property dispute, or a sexual problem.

Whatever the *pragma* ultimately was, Paul was not happy to see church members taking it to a civil court. Could not they, as Christian brothers and sisters, have worked it out among themselves, rather than bring the issue before “the unrighteous” (*1 Cor. 6:1, NKJV*)?

It is also possible, as some suppose, that the litigants of 1 Corinthians 6:1 are the father and the son of 1 Corinthians 5:1. In any case, it is unnecessary to understand the issue to understand the point. Paul cared about the church’s identity as a Christian community as seen by outsiders. Christians should not air dirty laundry in public (*1 Cor. 6:6*). Neither should they use secular means for judging inside matters. In the Roman world, individuals of a higher rank of wealth or political function tended to be favored in a court. Conversely, Christians must perform a Christlike judgment and distinguish themselves from secular standards.

Think about Paul’s catalog of vices in 1 Corinthians 5:10, 11 and 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10. Why does he list sexual sins along with other sins such as idolatry, thievery, greed, and extortion?

Antidote Against Sexual Immorality

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8. What does this passage say about the connection between sanctification and abstinence from sexual immorality?

Though Paul was writing to someone else in the above texts, the principle can be applied across the board, to all Christians which still, though, leads to the question: What was going on in Corinth? Why all these problems?

Some in Corinth apparently believed that since the gospel set them free, they were allowed to do anything. They argued that just as the stomach was made for food, the body was made for sex, and sex for the body (*1 Cor. 6:13*). Paul responds that this is a misrepresentation of Christian freedom. The lack of integrity in sexual matters is inconsistent with Christian identity and is a misuse of the freedom granted to man through the gospel (*Rom. 8:2, Gal. 5:13*). We were set free from sin, not set “free” to commit it (*Rom. 8:2; Rom. 6:18, 22*). In fact, “the body is . . . for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (*1 Cor. 6:13*). We belong to Christ (*1 Cor. 6:15*), and who we are must impact what we do. One thing is inextricably linked to the other. This is portrayed in 1 Corinthians 6 in three different ways.

First, we are identified as **washed, sanctified, and justified** “in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (*1 Cor. 6:11, NKJV*). The sins listed in 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10, as well as the sexual immorality denounced in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20, have no place in the lives of those who were washed, sanctified, and justified.

Second, we are **members of Christ** (*1 Cor. 6:15*). This means that we must be united with Christ (*1 Cor. 6:17*). Sexual immorality is a violation of that union (*1 Cor. 6:13, 15*). Whoever joins with a person in extramarital sexual intercourse becomes “one body” with him or her (*1 Cor. 6:16*). Union with Christ through the Spirit must determine Christian ethics in sexual matters.

Third, our bodies are **“temples of the Holy Spirit”** (*1 Cor. 6:19, 20, NIV*). The only way to live a holy life with integrity in sexual matters is by having an intimate relationship with Christ through the Holy Spirit. Elsewhere, Paul refers to the experience of being a temple of the Spirit in terms of presenting the body “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (*Rom. 12:1, ESV*).

Think about the wreckage that sexual sins have brought upon humanity. What should this tell us about how serious this issue should be for the Christian?

Marriage and Singleness

Paul's affirmation that the body "is the temple of the Holy Spirit" (*1 Cor. 6:19, NKJV*) occurs in the context of a warning against sexual immorality. Being a temple of the Spirit is the only means to live a holy life. The church is a Christian community that distinguishes itself from the surrounding environment. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit that makes it possible.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19–7:9. How does this passage shed light on how one can put into practice the commandment to "flee from sexual immorality" (*1 Cor. 6:18, ESV*)?

There are significant lessons about sexuality in 1 Corinthians 7. Roughly speaking, this chapter can be divided up into two sections: (1) instructions regarding marriage (*1 Cor. 7:1–24*) and (2) instructions regarding singleness (*1 Cor. 7:25–40*). First Corinthians 7 helps us understand that speaking about sexuality is important and necessary.

However, when reading 1 Corinthians 7, we must remember that Paul is responding to specific questions related to issues in the church of Corinth. Otherwise, some statements could lead to the impression that he has a low view of marriage, which is not the case (*1 Tim. 4:1–3, 1 Tim. 5:14; also Heb. 13:4*).

Remarkably, the command "flee from sexual immorality" in 1 Corinthians 6:18 (*ESV*) is bracketed by the idea of joining Christ (*1 Cor. 6:17*) and being a temple of the Spirit (*1 Cor. 6:19*). Is there a better way of fleeing from sexual immorality? Of course not.

Also, God created sex, but it is to be enjoyed in marriage alone. Sex is a privilege of those in a male and female marriage, the only kind sanctioned in the Bible.

When saying "flee from sexual immorality," Paul may have in mind the story of Joseph (*Gen. 39:6–18*). The Bible says that before the lustful advances of Potiphar's wife, Joseph "fled out of the house" (*Gen. 39:18, ESV*). This is mentioned no fewer than four times in Genesis 39:6–18. The Bible doesn't say it directly, but it is implied that Joseph waited to have sex only in marriage (*Gen. 41:45*). He was a man filled with the Holy Spirit (*Gen. 41:38*) and wanted to do what was right before God's eyes.

How can we, as a church, protect ourselves from the aberrant views of sexuality that dominate the culture?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “A Message of Warning and Entreaty,” pp. 298–308, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

Interestingly, in the catalog of vices in 1 Corinthians 5:10, 11 and 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10, idolatry and drunkenness are listed along with sexual immorality. As Paul recalls in 1 Corinthians 10:7 (*compare with Exod. 32:1–6*), idolatrous festivals were usually marked with excessive eating and drinking, which opened the door for sexual immorality (*1 Cor. 10:8*). Ellen G. White says:

“It is impossible for any to enjoy the blessing of sanctification while they are selfish and gluttonous. . . . The power of the human constitution to resist the abuses put upon it is wonderful, but persistent wrong habits in excessive eating and drinking will enfeeble every function of the body. In the gratification of perverted appetite and passion even professed Christians cripple nature in her work and lessen physical, mental, and moral power.”—*The Sanctified Life*, pp. 25, 26.

“When one is fully emptied of self, when every false god is cast out of the soul, the vacuum is supplied by the inflowing of the Spirit of Christ. Such a one has the faith which works by love and purifies the soul from every moral and spiritual defilement.”—Ellen G. White, *The Home Missionary*, November 1893.

“God is seeking to exalt us to His high, pure, heavenly standard. For this purpose His Spirit is constantly striving with us. . . . Our natural tendencies, unless corrected by the Holy Spirit of God, have in them the seeds of moral death.”—Ellen G. White, Manuscript 12, 1888.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Many believers in Corinth manifested a desire to gain cultural approval. Why is that so dangerous to Christian identity? What can we do to prevent ourselves from making the same mistake?
- ❷ Paul’s rhetorical question “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?” (*1 Cor. 6:19, NKJV*) closes a series of seven questions in 1 Corinthians 5–6 introduced by the formula “Do you not know?” (*1 Cor. 5:6; 1 Cor. 6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19*). All of them demand an affirmative and emphatic answer—something like “Of course you do.” How do these questions help us understand Paul’s concerns about the church? Why should we, too, be concerned about these issues today?
- ❸ Marriage is from God (*Gen. 1:27, 28; Gen. 2:18–24*) and must be honored (*Heb. 13:4*). In a time when many consider it old-fashioned, how can we show the world that marriage is really a gift from God, directly from Eden itself?

High-end Fashion for Christ

By SANDRA DOMBROWSKI

Cameras are poised, ready to shoot. Models sporting hairstyles that defy gravity and trend-setting fashions wait to walk the runway. A high-end fashion show in New York City is about to begin.

If you peek backstage, you'll see Isabelle, the woman running the show, pray with each model before sending them down the catwalk.

Isabelle has rubbed shoulders with well-known fashion designers and celebrities. But what stirs her heart most is the ministry happening at Bryant Park Life Hope Center, an urban center of influence where Adventists are reaching people for Christ.

Raised as an Adventist, Isabelle was taught that the world is a ripe field of souls for God. Whatever she has done—ballet, modeling, skateboarding, and now fashion design—she does for Christ. But since God cured her from a debilitating injury, her desire to serve Him has intensified.

When Life Hope Center began in 2021, she had recently been healed. “At that moment, I had experienced so many miracles in my life that I wanted everybody to know,” Isabelle said. “When the Life Hope Center leaders asked for volunteers, I said yes.”

But Isabelle's impact reaches beyond the doors of the center. Because God has blessed her with success in the fashion world, she has the opportunity to influence an industry where few if any Adventists mingle. She leverages her design concept, fashion show themes, and personal interactions to point people to Christ.

Isabelle issues press releases with an explanation of the inspiration behind the shows, so no one misses the message. “In every collection of clothing I present, ultimately, I'm always pushing the same button, asking the audience to search their hearts, investigate their own actions and motives, and ask themselves, is there a God out there? Should I change? Is there hope for me?” Isabelle explains.

Isabelle also reaches out with her warm personal touch to share God's love and peace. “After Fashion Week, the people who work with me would call me just to listen to my voice because they said it gives them peace,” she said. “I know that's God, because I speak too fast to be peaceful!” She prays with the models, the organizers, and anyone in this highly competitive industry who appears anxious. “Some people ask me what church I go to. They say, ‘Wherever you go, I want to go.’ ”

Then Isabelle brings them to Life Hope Center for a program or Bible studies or to one of the area Adventist churches. She finds joy in volunteering at this center of influence. But wouldn't you say that as she intentionally uses every aspect of her life to win people to Christ, she, herself, is a center of influence? What would happen if every follower of Jesus saw themselves as a center of influence?

To learn more about urban centers of influence and their ministry to plant new groups of Adventist believers, visit urbancenters.org.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *1 Corinthians 6:19, 20*

Study Focus: *1 Cor. 5:1–13, 1 Cor. 6:1–13.*

Introduction

When riding the “tube,” or subway, in the United Kingdom, travelers are continually reminded by means of audio messages and visual warnings to “Mind the Gap.” It would seem very obvious that people should look where they are about to step and that stepping into the gap between the train and the platform would lead to serious injury. Yet, people still do step into the gap. Thus, there seems to be a need to continually remind commuters of the obvious.

The Knowing-Doing Gap is a concept that refers to the disparity between what we know we should do and what we actually do. This concept can be defined as having the knowledge, the skills, or the ability to accomplish something but failing to do it.

As we consider the topic of sin in the church and of choices made (or not made) by members affecting the larger body of Christ, the concept of the Knowing-Doing Gap may offer us a good starting point to join the biblical conversation.

Lesson Themes

This week’s lesson highlights three important themes:

- 1. The Dangers of Rationalizing Sin.** We often disconnect ethical and moral issues from our practice and the choices we make by either ignoring the obvious or stifling our convictions in order to rationalize our behavior. Paul’s message to the Corinthians offers a good example of such behavior and contains a clear indication of how to resolve this situation.
- 2. The Biblical Basis for Marriage.** The biblical concept of marriage is based on Creation theology and should offer the foundation for our reflection on the topic. The incestuous practice referenced in 1 Corinthians 5:1 and the lack of critical reflection on the issue by the Corinthian church community remind us of the reality of the Knowing-Doing Gap within the church.
- 3. Conflict Resolution.** Conflict resolution among church members should be done within the church and not through the secular legal courts. Resolving conflict within the church offers the opportunity for redemptive justice and underlines the conviction that the church, the body of Christ, is capable of resolving even challenging issues.

Part II: Commentary

1. Background: Marriage and Sexual Practices: Marriage in Greco-Roman society was marked by the authority of the head of the household (usually the husband) in relation to his wife. Extended households, including several generations of family members and employees and slaves, were common. Wives usually managed the daily affairs of the household: controlling the servants and slaves, guiding the education of the children, and supervising the replenishing of storerooms.

Romans had two types of legal marriages: with or without *manus* (Latin: literally, “hand”). Without *manus* was the legal and economic authority that a father maintained over his daughter after her marriage. “In early Roman times, marriage with *manus* was frequent. But by the NT period, marriage without *manus*, where a father maintained legal and economic authority (Latin: *potestas*) over his married daughter, was much more common. . . . Such measures [marriage with *manus*] reinforced the connection of daughters to their families and could give daughters powerful allies in marriage disputes.” —Margaret Y. MacDonald, “Marriage, NT,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. K. Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), vol. 3, p. 812. Legal marriages could be entered into only by free citizens, even though funerary inscriptions show that slave couples “frequently understood themselves as married and set out to create a stable family unit” (p. 813), even without formal marriage agreements.

Jewish marriage had much in common with marriage in the Greco-Roman world. The payment of a dowry was important; marriages were usually arranged by families and created a network of extended households. Paul’s view of marriage reflects his Jewish background, even though he was not married himself.

2. The Knowing-Doing Gap: Paul is straightforward in his communication to the church at Corinth about a clear Knowing-Doing Gap in their church community. This gap was associated with sexual immorality (*porneia*), according to 1 Corinthians 5:1, “of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans” (*ESV*). The Knowing-Doing Gap is often a reflection of human frailty and sinfulness. Paul describes this condition well in Romans 7:19: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (*ESV*). Most of us would agree with Paul’s observation at some point in our lives. Somehow, the good that we are convinced about, or have even committed to do, is sometimes not what we choose to do. New Testament scholars have discussed the identity of the “I” in the passage in Romans 7 and have

offered a number of suggestions. Neither of these interpretations will diminish or change the basic reality of the Knowing-Doing Gap in the life of the followers of Jesus. The law of God, so prevalent in Romans 7, is not sufficient to save us from ourselves and from our sin. We truly need a Savior!

What we really need is a transformation of heart that can be effectuated only by the Spirit of God. Paul affirms this reality in the powerful words of Romans 8:1: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (*ESV*). When we are “in Christ Jesus” we will be safe, and transformation can begin. Overcoming this Knowing-Doing Gap requires commitment and an openness to change, for change—especially mental change and cognitive behavioral change—requires new patterns, and lots of practice. In the words of James K. A. Smith: “I can’t just think my way into virtue. . . . Laws, rules, and commands specify and articulate the good; they inform me about what I ought to do. But virtue is different: virtue isn’t acquired intellectually but affectively. Education in virtue is not like learning the Ten Commandments or memorizing Colossians 3:12–14. Education in virtue is a kind of formation, a retraining of our dispositions. ‘Learning’ virtue—becoming virtuous—is more like practicing scales on the piano than learning music theory: the goal is, in a sense, for your fingers to learn the scales so they can then play ‘naturally,’ as it were. Learning here isn’t just information acquisition; it’s more like inscribing something into the very fiber of your being.”—James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), p. 18.

3. Sexual Immorality: There are few sins that generate more discussions among the faithful than sins associated with sexuality. *Porneia*, “sexual immorality,” is mentioned for the first time in the epistle in 1 Corinthians 5:1 and is further discussed in chapters 5–7. “In Koine Greek the word can refer to general immorality, but it was most often related to payment for prostitutes or occasionally to fornication.”—Paul Gardner, *1 Corinthians, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), p. 224.

The sexual ethics of Judaism and of the early church were based on Scripture: a heterosexual relationship in the context of marriage, rooted in Creation theology. Clearly, the citizens of Corinth had a much more lax understanding of sexual ethics—but even they would have been appalled by the sexual relationship between a man and his father’s wife. The Greek terminology used to describe the wife suggests that she was not the biological mother of the person, but his stepmother, still a serious violation of morality.

Paul's concern, however, was the indifference of the Corinthian church to this situation. Instead of mourning this reality, Paul describes the church as "arrogant" (*1 Cor. 5:2, ESV*) and willing to overlook this situation. Some scholars have suggested that the person practicing this type of sexual immorality must have been very influential or rich. This situation did not call for tolerance but for decisive action.

In his letter, Paul calls the church to take swift action. The members were to "deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (*1 Cor. 5:5, ESV*). This metaphorical statement refers to the expulsion of the man from the church body. The church was to confirm his own choice. As one commentary noted, "Since by his actions he had chosen to enter the realm of Satan, the decision of the church was to confirm his choice. He would be left to suffer the consequences of his evil actions"—"1 Corinthians," in the *Andrews Bible Commentary*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez et al. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), p. 1624.

This ecclesiastic decision should be understood in a redemptive context, similar to Jesus' statement in Matthew 18:17 when discussing conflict in the church and separation between the church and an erring member who is to become to the church "as a Gentile and a tax collector" (*ESV*). Such action was to be taken in order that the erring member might become the object of loving care and kind concern of the church. Then the church would be able to demonstrate that love by inviting him to repent and to become part of God's kingdom again.

4. Church Conflict Resolution: Paul's concern for the members of the Corinthian church also involved the way the church resolved tensions and conflicts between themselves. The fact that church members took other members to an official court was utterly impossible for Paul to understand (*see 1 Cor. 6:1–8*). This problem highlights the many internal conflicts and disputes the church seems to have had and the members' lack of wisdom and godly judgment in resolving these conflicts and disputes within the "body."

The church as a united body repeats and echoes Paul's earlier concerns about factions and unity (*1 Corinthians 3 and 4*). Paul's insistence on resolving tensions and issues internally seems to have its precedent in the Old Testament and in Jewish tradition. This precedent is rooted in the belief that God Himself was the Judge of His people (*compare with 1 Sam. 24:15, Ps. 50:6, Ps. 75:7, Isa. 33:22, etc.*) and of all the earth (*Gen. 18:25*).

Part III: Life Application

Tension and conflict in the church are not easy issues to resolve. The texts

dealing with the issue of sexual immorality and how the church should resolve this problem offer the modern reader important strategies for resolving sin, tension, and conflict in our faith communities. Consider with your class the following questions:

1. **What would you tell a friend who tells you that he struggles with doing the right thing—even though he knows what he should do?**

2. **Does the Knowing-Doing Gap have anything to do with righteousness by works? If so, why? If not, why not?**

3. **Why is it so difficult to offer forgiveness to those struggling with sexual sins?**

4. **What would be the best strategy to help those struggling with sexual sins?**

All to the Glory of God



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Corinthians 8; Acts 15:20; 1 Cor. 9:1–6; 1 Cor. 10:5–22; Deut. 6:4, 5; Mark 12:28–31.*

Memory Text: “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (*1 Corinthians 10:31, NKJV*).

First Corinthians 8–10 brings the discussion on sexuality (*in chapters 5–6*) to a conclusion at the same time that it introduces Paul's answers to specific questions asked through a letter (*1 Cor. 7:1*) from the Corinthians. These answers will dominate the remainder of 1 Corinthians.

The transitional nature of 1 Corinthians 7 indicates that sexual immorality (*chapters 5–7*) and idolatry (*chapters 8–10*) are related topics. Indeed, they are often mentioned together in the New Testament (*see Acts 15:20, 29; Acts 21:25; 1 Cor. 6:9; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5; Rev. 21:8; Rev. 22:15*).

In general, while in 1 Corinthians 5–7 Paul deals with the problem of sexual immorality, in 1 Corinthians 8–10 his main concern is the issue of idolatry. He states that Christians must flee from both (*1 Cor. 6:18, 1 Cor. 10:14*).

Last week, we saw that by being a temple of the Holy Spirit (*1 Cor. 6:19, 20*), one can flee from sexual immorality. This week, we will see that one can flee from idolatry by doing “all to the glory of God” (*1 Cor. 10:31, NKJV*).

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 1.

Knowledge Versus Love

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1–13. Why does Paul contrast knowledge with love, and what is the context here? What point is he making?

Paul uses the theme of food offered to idols in order to address a deeper issue: the lack of love for others (*1 Corinthians 8*). The matter of food offered to idols split the church of Corinth into two groups. Some believed that their knowledge about the nonexistence of other gods gave them the right to eat anything (*1 Cor. 8:4*). These are referred to as the “strong” (*1 Cor. 4:10*). Those who opposed this behavior are called the “weak” (*1 Cor. 8:9–12*). Paul uses such a label because they did not overcome some superstitious beliefs that marked their previous pagan experience. When seeing the “strong” eating food offered to idols, they might conclude that Christianity and idolatry were compatible. So, Paul did not want the “strong” to become a stumbling block to the weak.

The Bible sees the act of eating food offered to idols very negatively (*Acts 15:20, 29; Acts 21:25; compare with Rev. 2:14, 20*). However, Paul does not utter as radical statements as one sees in these passages. This is because his primary concern regards the lack of unity that the misuse of knowledge could cause. Paul is not criticizing knowledge as evil in itself; instead, he’s against the kind of knowledge that leads to arrogance and division in the church. Knowledge without love is not true knowledge at all (*1 Cor. 8:2*). True knowledge arises only when one loves God and is known by Him (*1 Cor. 8:3*).

Quoting Deuteronomy 6:4, Paul shows that believers must know that there is only one God (*1 Cor. 8:4–6*). Interestingly, he follows the same idea one sees in Deuteronomy 6:4, 5, where the statement that our God is one is followed by the command “You shall love the LORD your God” (*NKJV*). For both Paul and Moses, knowledge without love is worthless.

Confident in their knowledge, the “strong” believed that eating food sacrificed to idols was harmless. As we will see on Wednesday and Thursday, Paul conceded to them that right under certain conditions. However, if that became a stumbling block for the “weak” (*1 Cor. 8:9*), it should be avoided. Christians are supposed to practice self-denial out of love for Christ and others.

Paul argues that, without love, knowledge may become a bad thing (*1 Corinthians 8*). In what situations can knowledge without love indeed be bad?

Selfless Love

Read 1 Corinthians 9:1–6. How does this passage provide a practical example of what it means to practice self-denial motivated by love?

At first sight, it looks as though Paul’s defense of his apostleship, in 1 Corinthians 9, has nothing to do with the previous discussion on knowledge versus love. One cannot forget, though, that the Bible was not originally written in chapters. What Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 9 is not disconnected from the preceding material. Indeed, 1 Corinthians 9 offers a practical example of selfless love for Christ and for the brethren. For the sake of love, Paul relinquishes a few rights.

“To eat and drink” (*1 Cor. 9:4, NKJV*). Here food and drink represent financial assistance in general. As an apostle, Paul had the right to receive material support from those to whom he ministered. Other religious leaders in his time used to do just that. But he didn’t; instead, he supported himself by making tents (*Acts 18:3*).

“To take along a believing wife” (*1 Cor. 9:5, NKJV*). A married apostle was allowed to make a missionary journey with his wife at the church’s expense. Examples of missionary couples include Priscilla and Aquila (*Rom. 16:3*) and Andronicus and Junia (*Rom. 16:7*). But Paul was unmarried (*1 Cor. 7:8*). He could get married and then benefit from the right of being accompanied by a wife, with financial support for both.

“To refrain from working” for a living (*1 Cor. 9:6, NKJV*). Paul and Barnabas had the right to earn wages for their missionary work (*1 Cor. 9:4–6*). Paul made tents for a living (*Acts 18:3*), but we don’t know what Barnabas’s occupation was. We know that he was very generous (*Acts 4:36, 37*), and thus, he was willing to support himself.

In 1 Corinthians 9:7–11, Paul develops the idea of 1 Corinthians 9:6 in order to show that it is fair for him and Barnabas to earn a living from the church (*1 Cor. 9:11, 12*). The Lord Himself commanded, “Those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel” (*1 Cor. 9:14, NKJV; compare with 1 Tim. 5:18*). Nevertheless, Paul says, “We have not made use of this right” (*1 Cor. 9:12, ESV*). Thus, Paul presents himself as an example of self-denial (*1 Cor. 9:1–18*) and argues that this benefits the preaching of the gospel in Corinth (*1 Cor. 9:19–23*).

What are things that, though they perhaps are due you, you might still be better off relinquishing in order to be a more effective witness for the Lord?

Learning From the Past

After providing an example of self-denial from his own experience, Paul turns more particularly toward the issue of idolatry. In a sense, 1 Corinthians 10 develops the idea of 1 Corinthians 9:27, where Paul comments that he exercises self-discipline in order not to become disqualified. He wants the Corinthians to follow his example, but Jesus is the model *par excellence* (1 Cor. 11:1).

Read 1 Corinthians 10:7–11. What sins did Israel commit in the wilderness, and why do the privileges granted to them make their sins even worse?

In 1 Corinthians 10:1–5, Paul alludes to the history of God’s people in the wilderness. The reference to the cloud and the sea brings God’s leading, presence, and protection to mind. In turn, food and drink stand for God’s provision. Paul refers to the experience of Israel in the cloud and sea as a baptism, analogous to Christian baptism. Likewise, by referring to food and drink, Paul alludes to the Lord’s Supper.

In other words, 1 Corinthians 10 teaches that, in a sense, Christians are living the same experiences as Israel did. However, Paul recalls the history of Israel because he does not want that history to repeat itself. Despite all the privileges Israel had, many of the people nevertheless desired evil things (1 Cor. 10:6), such as idolatry (1 Cor. 10:7) and sexual immorality (1 Cor. 10:8). No wonder, then, that “God was not pleased with most of them” (1 Cor. 10:5, NIV).

It is easy to point the finger at ancient Israel and say they committed gross sins. However, Paul argues that Christians are susceptible to practicing similar sins despite their immense privilege of knowing the history of Christ. This is clear in the warning: “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12, NKJV). The phrase “who thinks” suggests that some in the church did not realize they were in danger of falling into those sins. Do we run the same risk today?

“Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” Who among us has not experienced the reality of that warning?

The Bible says that God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear, “but with the temptation will also make the way of escape” (1 Cor. 10:13, NKJV). Why, then, do we still find it so easy to fall into sin?

Warning Against Idolatry

Read 1 Corinthians 10:5–22. Why must we flee from idolatry?

In 1 Corinthians 10:14–22, Paul resumes the issue of food offered to idols. Offering food to idols may be strange in many cultures today, but it was common in biblical times. When animals were sacrificed to the gods in the heathen temples, part of the animal was given to the officiating priests, who sold the meat. Some of this meat found its way into the public markets. Because this meat was not kept separate from other meat that was also offered for sale in the market, a Christian might unknowingly purchase meat that had been offered to idols. The counsel of the apostle is that such meat may be freely purchased by Christians.

Nevertheless, while meat previously sacrificed in a temple could be eaten by Christians at home (*1 Cor. 8:1–13*), the practice of going into pagan temples and participating in their festivals was clearly forbidden for Christians. The criterion is clear: Christians are allowed to eat that meat at home because the idols are nothing (*1 Cor. 8:4*); however, Christians must not participate in pagan ceremonies because this corresponds to worshiping demons (*1 Cor. 10:20, 21*). Taking part in pagan rituals equals having communion with demons (*1 Cor. 10:20*), just as taking part in the Lord's Supper equals having communion with Christ (*1 Cor. 10:16*).

Thus, Paul says, “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons” (*1 Cor. 10:21, NKJV*). As Jesus said: “No one can serve two masters” (*Matt. 6:24, NKJV*).

Paul teaches that God requires wholehearted loyalty. He implies that idolatry provokes “the Lord to jealousy” (*1 Cor. 10:22, NKJV*). For that not to happen, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 8:4–6, provides an infallible rule against idolatry, by alluding to Deuteronomy 6:4, 5, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God *with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength*” (*NKJV; emphasis supplied*). To this idea of loving God above all things in Deuteronomy 6:5, Jesus added, “ ‘ ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ ’ ” (*Mark 12:31, NKJV; see also Lev. 19:18*).

An idol doesn't have to be a stone statue. We can make an idol out of just about anything. What idols, if any, do you need to flee from in your own life?

Overcoming Idolatry

In 1 Corinthians 8:1–3, Paul argues that love for God keeps one safe from idolatry. This argument is resumed and further developed in 1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1. In 1 Corinthians 8:3, he speaks about our love for God. He says, “Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being” (*1 Cor. 10:24, NKJV*). This is love for others.

Read Mark 10:17–22 and Mark 12:28–31. What do these two passages have in common, and how do they apply to the situation in 1 Corinthians 10?

Paul is doing in 1 Corinthians 10 precisely what Jesus did in Mark 12:28–31; namely, he binds together the two great commandments of the law: love for God above all, and love for others. In the story of the rich young ruler (*Mark 10:17–22*), Jesus unites these two kinds of love, and does so by respectively alluding to Deuteronomy 6:4 (*see Mark 10:18*) and the second table of the Decalogue (*see Mark 10:19*). The problem of that rich young man is that he loved his possessions more than he loved God and his neighbors (*Mark 10:22*). He valued his treasure on earth above the treasures in heaven. He valued his money above the poor (*Mark 10:21*). He was an idolater.

Following the teachings of Jesus, Paul hints that the principle of loving God above all and the neighbor as oneself is to be applied to the hypothetical situations he mentions in 1 Corinthians 10:27, 28. This means that even lawful things may not be helpful or edifying since they can be offensive to someone else’s conscience (*1 Cor. 10:23*). This principle is masterly synthesized in the words “Do all to the glory of God” (*1 Cor. 10:31, NKJV*). By saying that all must be done to the glory of God, Paul indicates that idolatry can manifest itself in the most varied forms, for anything that usurps the glory that belongs to God alone is a form of idolatry (*Isa. 42:8*).

Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1 serve as a conclusion to chapters 8–10. He makes it clear he did not seek his own advantage, “but that of many, that they may be saved” (*1 Cor. 10:33, ESV*). That is how he imitated Christ (*1 Cor. 11:1*).

How can you learn to better love your neighbor as yourself?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Idolatry at Sinai,” pp. 315–330, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“How much good might be done if we would make a right use of our associations with one another! Every one who has received of the heavenly benefits is under obligation to shed some light on the pathway of others. . . . Then all those who truly love God will cease their idolatry of self.”—Ellen G. White, in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 18, 1884, p. 730.

“Paul urged his brethren to ask themselves what influence their words and deeds would have upon others and to do nothing, however innocent in itself, that would seem to sanction idolatry or offend the scruples of those who might be weak in the faith. ‘Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. . . .’

“The apostle’s words of warning to the Corinthian church are applicable to all time and are especially adapted to our day. By idolatry he meant not only the worship of idols, but self-serving, love of ease, the gratification of appetite and passion.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 316, 317.

“If you see that by doing certain things which you have a perfect right to do, you hinder the advancement of God’s work, refrain from doing those things. Do nothing that will close the minds of others against the truth. . . . All things may be lawful, but all things are not expedient.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 215.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 According to Paul, the behavior of a mature Christian can sometimes inhibit the growth of an immature Christian. Think of situations in which this may happen. Why is the principle of loving God above all, and the other as oneself, the only way to deal with this challenge?
- 2 What are some idols that even Christians can end up worshiping, if not careful? What are some good things that we can turn into idols? Also, how do you know if something that you care greatly about has become an idol?
- 3 Paul says he disciplined his body and brought it into subjection so he would not become disqualified when preaching the gospel (1 Cor. 9:27). Based on this week’s study, think about what can disqualify a person as a preacher of the gospel.
- 4 In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul addresses the dangers of idolatry and says, “Flee from idolatry” (1 Cor. 10:14). Why is idolatry so bad?

The Davis Indians: Part 1

By MICHAEL W. CAMPBELL

Ovid Elbert Davis was born in Michigan on April 3, 1868. In 1902, he was inspired by Ellen White's counsel to become a missionary, so he completed a ministerial course and accepted a call to work among the indigenous peoples of Alaska and then British Columbia.

On January 19, 1906, the General Conference voted to send Davis to British Guiana (Guiana), where the Adventist work recently had been started. He married Carrie Rosley in April, and the couple went to their new mission field the following month.

Davis distributed literature during his first two years in British Guiana. Then, in 1910, he reported organizing a new church 160 miles up the Barama River. It would become the Rio Paruime Mission. It was also in 1910 that Davis received a request from tribes deep in the interior that had never been visited by white men, asking to be taught the message of salvation.

These tribes had learned about the Adventist work by contact with indigenous people at the mission at Tapagruma Creek. There were reports that an old chief had been visited by a "shining being" who taught them about Creation, the entrance of sin, the story of the promised Redeemer, and Christ's second coming. He also showed them how to worship on the seventh-day Sabbath and live a healthful life. He told him that a man with a black book would come and teach them more.

The journey took Davis two months. In one report, he stated that he had traveled 29 days by boat and an additional 10 days through dense forest.

Davis taught the Word of God to the forest tribes with his "black book" and reported the establishment of three mission bases among them. He noted that 187 people "took their stand to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." He built three church buildings and began to instruct the new believers "on the points of our faith." He also taught them to sing a song in English, "There's Not a Friend Like the Lowly Jesus."

Davis returned for a second visit in 1911. He complained about a fever and heart problems just before departure. The last entry in his diary that he was able to write in his own handwriting was "Monday, July 17—The day was spent in further instruction and naming the people." Naming people referenced the desire of new converts for a new name representative of their resolve to follow the Christian's God and learn His ways.

This story was adapted from Michael Campbell's biographical article in the online Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists. We invite you to visit encyclopedia.adventist.org to enjoy more stories about Adventist missionaries. Read the rest of this story next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *1 Corinthians 10:31*

Study Focus: *1 Corinthians 10.*

Introduction

Imagine a group of hikers setting out on a challenging mountain hike. The trail is known for its breathtaking views, but also for its dangerous cliffs. At the trailhead, they see a warning sign: “**CAUTION: Dangerous Cliffs Ahead. Many Have Fallen! Stay on the Marked Path.**”

Some hikers take the warning seriously, staying on the marked trail and avoiding the cliffs. Others ignore the sign as they want the thrill of standing at the edge and taking the ultimate selfie photo. A third group of hikers insists that they have the right to explore wherever they want without having to pay attention to the marked trails. “It’s our hike. No one can tell us what to do!” But their choices don’t affect just themselves—if one of them falls or gets lost, he or she will have led those following into danger.

The Christian life, of course, is much more than a hike. However, the three approaches taken by the hikers can mirror our faith walk. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul discusses these approaches.

Lesson Themes

As most biblical authors did, Paul saw idolatry as a very serious sin that stood in opposition to the true worship of God. The issue of worship is central to everyday-life questions, as any alliance with idol worship is a rejection of God’s rulership and serves as an opening for moral and spiritual perversion. Within this context, Paul enlarges on several themes:

- 1. Learning From Israel’s Past.** Paul reminds the Corinthians of Israel’s failures in the wilderness—idolatry, sexual immorality, testing God, and grumbling. Their downfall serves as a *warning* for believers not to repeat the same mistakes.
- 2. The Danger of Idolatry.** Paul urges believers to flee from idolatry and not to participate in pagan practices, reminding them that worshipping idols is incompatible with worshipping God.
- 3. Christian Freedom and Responsibility** (*1 Cor. 10:23–30*). Paul addresses how believers should use their freedom wisely, especially when it comes to eating food sacrificed to idols. Just because something is allowed doesn’t mean it’s beneficial for everyone.
- 4. Living for God’s Glory** (*1 Cor. 10:31–33*). Paul sums up his message by encouraging believers to make every decision with God’s glory in mind.

Additionally, Paul exhorts them to act in a way that reflects Christ and points others to Him.

Part II: Commentary

1. Background: Forms of Worship in First-Century A.D. Corinth: The concept of worship was not foreign to the Corinthians. Unlike in many modern Western societies today, worship back then was not a private personal matter. Politics, commerce, and social life were all intertwined with worship. Worship practices in first-century Corinth included sacrifices, feasts, festivals, and processions, as well as sexual rituals in some cults. Corinth was a major Greco-Roman city known for its religious pluralism and devotion to various gods. The city had numerous temples and cults, reflecting its status as a wealthy trade hub, influenced by both Greek and Roman religious traditions.

Worship in first-century A.D. Corinth took many forms, reflecting the city's cosmopolitan composition. There were many gods (see section 2 below). While a city often had a preferred deity, individuals could choose which deities they wanted to worship, depending on what benefits they wished to gain. Most people worshiped several gods. Throughout the Roman Empire, good citizens were expected to worship the Roman emperor as well. While there was a degree of freedom in choosing a god, refusal to worship the emperor could bring social and political consequences, as this worship was viewed as a demonstration of loyalty to Rome.

Most temples performed blood sacrifices of bulls, goats, or birds that were offered to the gods and were sometimes followed by communal feasts. During these banquets in temples, worshipers ate of the food that had been offered to the deity. There were also large public celebrations involving religious rites, such as the Isthmian Games (which were dedicated to the god Poseidon). These celebrations included processions, feasting, and performances. Some of these worship acts had sexual elements, especially in the worship of the fertility gods. Some scholars believe that Aphrodite's temple worship involved ritual prostitution (compare with Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Corinth," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988], p. 514).

Although worship was generally very public, there were some religions, such as the cult of Demeter and Persephone, that had secretive initiation rites and worship acts. This exclusivity, which promised spiritual enlightenment not available to ordinary people, was no doubt attractive to a certain class. While the major temples held public worship rituals, many people also practiced private worship, as can be seen in the private shrines with small statues and incense offerings that archaeologists have uncovered in private households.

2. Defining Idolatry: In a world in which idols were everywhere and were treated with respect and devotion as stand-ins for the gods they represented, Paul's claim in 1 Corinthians 8:4 that " 'an idol has no real existence' " and that " 'there is no God but one' " (*ESV*) must have sounded radical. Paul does not buy into the idea that figurines or objects (for example, idols) can have magical power in and of themselves. He does, however, recognize that some believers, especially those who had newly converted from paganism, might still view their conversion in terms of simply changing gods (or their allegiance to these gods). This attitude could be seen particularly in the issue of eating food that had been offered to idols.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul explains this new worldview (" 'there is no God but one' ") while giving a strong warning against idolatry. He uses Israel's history as an example to emphasize that idolatry is not just about worshiping statues. Idolatry also involves disloyalty to God, as well as the spiritual danger of not showing love and responsibility toward fellow believers.

Paul begins by reminding his readers of how the Israelites, who had experienced God's miraculous deliverance from Egypt, still fell into idolatry and suffered God's judgment. In 1 Corinthians 10:1–4, Paul recounts Israel's blessings. They had the divine guidance in the form of the cloud. They had experienced a miraculous deliverance as the sea parted, and they daily were sustained physically and spiritually by means of the manna and water from the rock (which Paul goes on to identify with Christ).

Despite these blessings, many Israelites failed. They displeased God by engaging in idolatry, which opened the door to sexual immorality (*1 Cor. 10:5–10*). They went on, disastrously, to test God. Their grumbling led to open rebellion and ended in their destruction.

Paul applies these events to the Corinthian believers (*1 Cor. 10:11–13*). Israel's history serves as a warning of the danger of idolatry. Paul calls for vigilance, but not for fear and anxiety, because God can provide victory over all that besets us.

Paul then gives a direct command: "Flee from idolatry" (*1 Cor. 10:14, ESV*). He explains that, although idols themselves have no power, there are evil angels and a devil to which an individual is indirectly pledging loyalty when participating in idol worship (*1 Cor. 10:20*). This reality makes participation in idolatrous feasts spiritually dangerous. Paul warns that believers cannot share in both the "cup of the Lord" and the "cup of demons" (*1 Cor. 10:21, ESV*), emphasizing the incompatibility of idolatry with Christianity.

In 1 Corinthians 10:15–18, Paul points out that just as partaking in the Lord's table symbolizes unity with Christ, so eating food from idol sacrifices creates an unholy spiritual connection. While the idols themselves are nothing, participating in acts of worship, such as sacrificing to the idols, involves fellowship with demons. *Idolatry is not just about worshiping false gods but also about being spiritually entangled with dark forces.*

Believers are called to exclusive devotion to God (*1 Cor. 10:21, 22*) and cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. Echoing Deuteronomy 32:21, Paul warns of God’s intolerance toward divided loyalty. Paul views idolatry as more than just false worship—it is spiritually dangerous and incompatible with faith in Christ.

3. Developing “Antibodies” Against Idolatry: While Paul calls for complete separation from idolatry, he goes on to explain, in 1 Corinthians 10:23–33, that separation should not result in criticizing and policing the church in order to keep it pure. Individual Christians have both freedom and responsibility, which Paul addresses in the practical concerns about food that may have been dedicated to idols and then, subsequently, made its way to the market.

In 1 Corinthians 10:23, 24, the principle of love over liberty is given. Unselfishness, and not clinging to one’s rights, or even one’s ideas of Christian lifestyle, should be made the norm. Even if something is not wrong or forbidden in the Bible, it may not be beneficial for others. Believers should prioritize the spiritual well-being of others over personal freedom.

In the next few verses (*1 Cor. 10:25–30*), Paul permits eating meat from the marketplace without questioning its origins. But he advises against eating it if someone explicitly states that it was sacrificed to idols, as the practice of not eating such foods served as a protective measure that prevented weaker believers from stumbling. Ultimately, believers should aim to glorify God in every aspect of their lives and try to encourage, rather than discourage, others. Their life mission should be pursuing the salvation of others rather than insisting on their own perspectives and rights (*1 Cor. 10:31–33*).

Part III: Life Application

First-century A.D. Corinth was a deeply religious city with a mix of Greek, Roman, and Eastern cults. Worship had many different expressions. Early Christians in Corinth had to navigate these influences while remaining faithful to Christ, which led Paul to address idolatry, moral purity, and Christian freedom in his letters. Based on these themes, discuss the following questions in your class:

- 1. Paul reminds the Corinthians of Israel’s past mistakes. Why do you think he does this? What lessons may we also learn from Israel’s experiences?**
-

2. **First Corinthians 10:12** warns, “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (*ESV*). **How can we guard against overconfidence in our spiritual walk?**
-

3. **God can provide a way out when we are tempted** (*1 Cor. 10:13*). **Have you ever experienced this provision in your life? How does this verse encourage you?**
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4. **While Paul warns against idolatry, he also outlines principles for identifying and counteracting idolatry. What are some modern forms of idolatry that Christians struggle with today? How can Paul’s advice in regard to idolatry be applied to them?**
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5. **Paul says, “ ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are helpful”** (*1 Cor. 10:23, ESV*). **How can we discern between what is beneficial and what is unprofitable in our lives?**
-

6. **In 1 Corinthians 10:31, Paul tells us to do everything for the glory of God. What does doing everything for the glory of God look like in daily life?**
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7. **Paul emphasizes not causing others to stumble** (*1 Cor. 10:32, 33*). **How can we balance our personal freedoms with our responsibility to others?**
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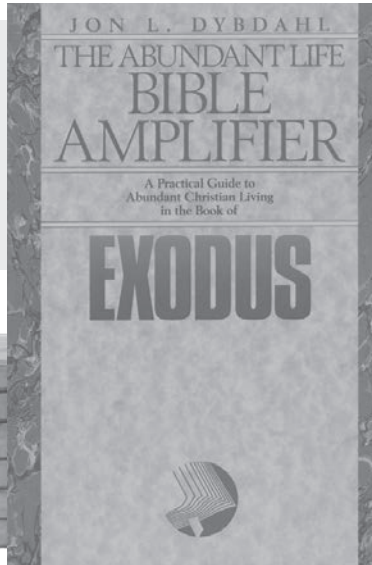
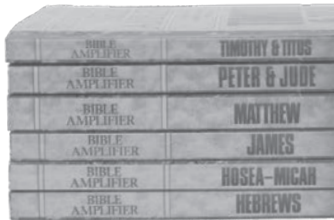
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Spiritual Gifts



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Corinthians 12, Eph. 4:11–13, 1 Corinthians 13, 1 Pet. 4:8–11, 1 Cor. 14:27, Amos 3:7.*

Memory Text: “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy” (*1 Corinthians 14:1, ESV*).

Like a human body, the church is one but has many members, each with different roles, functions, and gifts. Practiced with love, these spiritual gifts promote a sense of unity that reflects the character of the triune God.

This week we will survey 1 Corinthians 12–14 and its teaching on spiritual gifts. This section is part of a slightly larger unit, where Paul deals with the expected Christian behavior in religious settings (*1 Corinthians 11–14*). Paul's primary concern has to do with the problem of disorderly gatherings. His answer to this problem is that the church is a body whose parts have different functions that contribute to “the edifying of the body of Christ” (*Eph. 4:12, NKJV*). In short, God gave the church spiritual gifts in order to promote unity through diversity.

Certainly, Paul still has in mind the factionalism problem addressed in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, where the answer to the lack of agreement among church members is unity in Christ. Now, he develops that idea by presenting his understanding of the role of spiritual gifts. According to Paul, unity in Christ and the Spirit is the only means of avoiding schisms.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 8.

Varieties of Gifts

In 1 Corinthians 12:1, Paul introduces a new topic with the formula “now concerning.” Scholars discuss whether he is talking about “spiritual gifts” or “spiritual people” because the Greek phrase *tōn pneumatikōn* allows both interpretations. “Spiritual gifts” is preferable in light of 1 Corinthians 12:4, where Paul clearly refers to spiritual gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12:2, 3, Paul points out that the Spirit’s first gift is the bold confession that Jesus is Lord. In New Testament times, to say that Jesus is Lord is to say that Caesar is not (*Acts 17:7; also John 19:12, 15*). This was seen as sedition against the imperial power and, hence, was punishable by death.

Jesus and Paul emphasized that faith in God—even in the face of persecution and the threat of death—is a gift of the Spirit. Actually, faith is the most basic gift. Not surprisingly, faith is first on the list in 1 Corinthians 13:13. That faith is a spiritual gift is clear by Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 12:9. However, there are many other gifts. The fact that the Holy Spirit distributes the different types of gifts “to each one individually as He wills” (*1 Cor. 12:11, NKJV*) proves that all of them are necessary.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1–6. What is the emphasis of this passage?

The repetition of “varieties” emphasizes the multiplicity of gifts. What Paul names as “spiritual gifts” in 1 Corinthians 12:1 is developed in verses 4–6, through three different angles: “gifts” (*charisma*), “services” or “ministries” (*diakonia*), and “activities” (*energēma*). Although these words mean different things, it is important not to draw a fine distinction between them because of the parallelism of the passage. One should also notice that the spiritual gifts are designed to promote unity based on the triune character of God (*see also Eph. 4:8–11*). While the Spirit grants gifts to believers, it is God who empowers them to serve Christ in the community of believers (*1 Cor. 12:5, 6*). Each believer is granted gifts individually (*1 Cor. 12:11*), but they all are to benefit the community of believers as a whole.

Notice again Paul’s emphasis on unity. Why is this so important to the church?

Unity Through Diversity

The language of oneness introduced in 1 Corinthians 12:4–6 (“the same Spirit,” “the same Lord,” and “the same God”) is developed in the rest of 1 Corinthians 12. This is evidenced by Paul’s use of phrases such as “one and the same Spirit” (*1 Cor. 12:11, NKJV*), “the body is one” (*1 Cor. 12:12*), “one body” (*1 Cor. 12:12, 13, 20*), “one Spirit” (*1 Cor. 12:13 [two times]*), and “the same care for one another” (*1 Cor. 12:25, NKJV*).

Alongside the concept of unity, Paul highlights the diversity of members in the body of Christ through such expressions as “many members” (*1 Cor. 12:12, 20*), “we were all baptized” (*1 Cor. 12:13, NKJV*), “not one member but many” (*1 Cor. 12:14, NKJV*), “the whole body” (*1 Cor. 12:17*), “each one of them” (*1 Cor. 12:18, NKJV*), “members of the body” (*1 Cor. 12:22, 23*), and “all the members” (*1 Cor. 12:26*). This emphasis on both unity and diversity indicates that spiritual gifts aim to promote unity *through* diversity.

This unity amid diversity must reflect the character of God. The Father is one person, the Son is another person, and the Holy Spirit another. The three maintain Their individualities while working together to edify the church and empower it for mission (*1 Cor. 12:4–6, Eph. 4:11–13*).

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–31. Why is the analogy of a body with its many parts appropriate to represent the church and its members?

One central thought in 1 Corinthians 12 is that although the body’s members are individually so different from one another (*1 Cor. 12:15–20*), they are all dependent on each other (*1 Cor. 12:21–26*). The feet depend on the eyes to see where they must walk; in turn, the eyes can’t touch anything—only the hands can. Also, the idea that some members are weaker (*1 Cor. 12:22*) or less honorable (*1 Cor. 12:23*) than others is only an impression, for all are necessary (*1 Cor. 12:22*).

Unfortunately, there was a tendency among the Corinthians to value some gifts to the neglect of others. To rectify the Corinthians from making this mistake, Paul called their attention to love, which is “a more excellent way” (*1 Cor. 12:31, NKJV*). In other words, no matter what the gift is, if practiced wisely and with love, it is pleasant to God.

See the lists of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10, 28; Romans 12:6–8; and Ephesians 4:11. What is your gift? How can you use it to edify the body of Christ?

“A More Excellent Way”

“Love is not one gift among many. It is the means through which all of the gifts reach their ultimate purpose.”—Carl P. Cosaert, “1 Corinthians,” *Andrews Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), p. 1643.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 4:8–11. What is the role of love as far as spiritual gifts are concerned?

First Corinthians 13 teaches that only through love can the spiritual gifts be used appropriately. Paul begins 1 Corinthians 13 by alluding to gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12, only to stress their lack of value if not driven by love. Thus, knowledge (*1 Cor. 12:8*) and faith (*1 Cor. 12:9*), even a faith “so as to remove mountains” (*1 Cor. 13:2, ESV*), are nothing without love (*1 Cor. 13:2*). Without love, the ability to speak in tongues (*1 Cor. 12:10, 28, 30*) is reduced merely to “a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” (*1 Cor. 13:1, NIV*). Likewise, even the important gift of prophecy is nothing without love (*1 Cor. 13:2*).

In 1 Corinthians 13:4–7, Paul focuses on what love is and what it is not; more particularly, what love does and what it does not do. The verbs he chose to characterize love indicate love is not so much something we feel as it is something that we practice. Thus, Paul mentions that love (1) shows patience; (2) shows kindness; (3) rejoices in the truth; (4) bears all things; (5) believes all things; (6) hopes all things; and (7) endures all things. Conversely, love (1) does not envy; (2) does not boast; (3) does not inflate with arrogance; (4) does not behave rudely; (5) does not seek its own [rights]; (6) does not get easily irritated; (7) does not keep record of wrongs; and (8) does not delight in wrongdoing.

This total of 15 verbs provides solid guidance for appropriate behavior in the practice of gifts. Notably, this discussion on the true nature of love lies precisely between 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, where Paul deals with the conflict regarding spiritual gifts. Indeed, love is the key to the wise use of spiritual gifts. Love is also placed side by side with faith and hope, “but the greatest of these is love” (*1 Cor. 13:13, NKJV*).

Why is love so central to our faith? What better way to experience the reality of God’s love than by prayerfully seeking to reflect that love to others?

The Gift of Tongues

What about the gift of tongues? In line with the manifestation of the gift elsewhere in the Bible (*Mark 16:17, Acts 2:1–13, Acts 10:44–48, Acts 19:6*), the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians is most likely the Spirit-granted ability to speak in foreign languages.

Paul mentions the gift of tongues in the list of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10 (see also *1 Cor. 12:28, 30; 1 Cor. 13:1, 8*). However, he refers to it repeatedly in 1 Corinthians 14. Indeed, the Greek word *glōssa* (“tongue”) appears more than twenty times in 1 Corinthians 12–14, with fifteen occurrences in 1 Corinthians 14 alone. Besides these, the Greek word *heteroglōssos* (“another tongue”) also occurs, in 1 Corinthians 14:21. This high number of references to the gift of tongues suggests that this matter is of particular concern for Paul. The misuse and abuse of this gift by the church in Corinth caused disorder and confusion in public worship (*1 Cor. 14:23, 27, 33, 40*).

Read 1 Corinthians 14:5, 13, 26, 27 and 1 Corinthians 12:10, 30. What particular instruction did Paul give concerning the gift of tongues?

The reason the gift of speaking in tongues must go hand in hand with that of interpreting them is that tongues must be intelligible (*1 Cor. 14:9*); otherwise, there is no benefit in using the gift (*1 Cor. 14:6*). This explains why Paul put so much emphasis on interpretation and understanding. Obviously, he is criticizing not the gift of tongues itself, but, as we will see tomorrow, the excessive prominence the Corinthians attributed to it, which led to the neglect of the gift of prophecy.

At this point, it is important to notice that although Paul desired that all the Corinthians could speak foreign languages (*1 Cor. 14:5*), he did not expect that to happen (*1 Cor. 12:10*). Thus, the thought that “all must speak in tongues before claiming baptism in the Holy Spirit is a perversion of Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14.”—Raoul Dederen, *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Commentary Reference Series, vol. 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2001), p. 620.

**Are there people in your church who speak other languages?
How can they use this ability to reach other people for Christ?
How can this fact help us understand the true nature of tongues that Paul is addressing?**

The Gift of Prophecy

The gift of prophecy occupies a prominent place in Paul's discussion on spiritual gifts. Interestingly, the gift of prophecy is usually mentioned before the gift of tongues (*1 Cor. 12:10, 28; 1 Cor. 13:8*). When the gift of tongues is mentioned first, this is only to emphasize its relative unimportance compared to the gift of prophecy (*1 Cor. 14:4, 5, 6, 22*).

Read Ephesians 4:11–13 and 1 Corinthians 14:3, 4. What do these passages say about the purpose of spiritual gifts in general and the gift of prophecy in particular?

The gift of prophecy is meant to provide edification, exhortation, and comfort (*1 Cor. 14:3; compare with Acts 15:32*). This suggests that prophecy is not so much about predicting the future as it is about how to live in the present. The Greek verb *prophēteuō* can mean either “to say something in advance” or “to say something *on behalf of* someone else.” For instance, the first sense is seen in Acts 2:29–31 (*compare with Amos 3:7*), where the idea that David is a prophet is explained as “foreseeing.” The second sense is seen in Acts 15:32, where Judas and Silas are identified as prophets. Their “prophecy,” however, consisted in encouraging and strengthening “the brothers with many words” (*ESV*).

From Ephesians 4:11–13, we learn that the spiritual gifts did not cease in the apostolic era. They should remain until the end (*Acts 2:39*). However, if someone claims to be a prophet, he/she must be evaluated based on the Scriptures. Broadly speaking, four rules should be satisfied. First, the unconditional prophecies always come true (*Deut. 18:22; Jer. 28:8, 9*). Second, the message agrees with that of previous prophets (*Deut. 13:1–3, Isa. 8:20*). Third, the daily life demonstrates a commitment to Christ (*1 John 4:1–3*). Fourth, Jesus said false prophets would be known by their fruits (*Matt. 7:15–20*). This is also true concerning true prophets.

The book of Revelation indicates that the gift of prophecy is a distinctive characteristic of the remnant church (*Rev. 12:17, Rev. 19:10*). As Seventh-day Adventists, we believe that the gift of prophecy was bestowed upon Ellen G. White and is reflected in her writings.

What are all the reasons we have for belief in Ellen G. White's prophetic gift? What questions remain about her role and authority?

Further Thought: Read Roswell F. Cottrell, “Spiritual Gifts,” pp. 5–16, in Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1.

“Let men go forth to labor, trusting in the Lord, and He will go with them, convicting and converting souls. One worker may be a ready speaker, another a ready writer, another may have the gift of sincere, earnest, fervent prayer, another the gift of singing. Another may have special power to explain the word of God with clearness. And each gift is to become a power for God because He co-operates with the worker. To one God gives the word of wisdom, to another knowledge, to another faith. But all are to work under the same head. The diversity of gifts leads to a diversity of operations, ‘but it is the same God which worketh all in all’ (1 Cor. 12:6).

“Let no man despise the supposed lesser gifts. Let all go to work. Let no one fold his hands in unbelief because he thinks that he can do no mighty work. Cease looking at self. Look to your Leader. In meekness, sincerity, and love do what you can.”—Ellen G. White, in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 12, 1906.

“We each need the help we can receive from other minds. God will work in other minds than ours. The various gifts given to different ones are to blend for the ‘perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ’ (Eph. 4:12). . . .

“There will always be obstacles before us, but we are to follow our Leader, and meet our difficulties unitedly, hand in hand.”—Ellen G. White, *The Upward Look*, p. 141.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Think a bit more about the gift of prophecy. Why is prophecy more important than tongues if they are not interpreted? If necessary, read 1 Corinthians 14 again in order to recap Paul’s arguments.
- 2 In class, talk about the life and ministry of Ellen G. White and why we, as a church, believe that she did indeed manifest the gift of prophecy. What great blessings come to the church from this gift? What also are the challenges in knowing how best to use this gift?
- 3 Think of three to five people who genuinely love you. How do you know their love for you is true? What does this tell you about why Paul spoke so much about love in his discussion on spiritual gifts?
- 4 However important love is, why must that not be the only criterion in judging whether or not someone is speaking truth and is worthy of being listened to?

The Davis Indians: Part 2

By MICHAEL W. CAMPBELL

Unable to write his final diary entry himself, Davis dictated it to the guide who entered it for him: “God has especially blessed in this trip. I had a complete mission at Paruima River, another at Mt. Tulameng, and then we came to Mt. Roraima. Just finished establishing a mission when I was taken sick.” This station officially was established on June 25, 1911, the first Seventh-day Adventist mission in this region. On his deathbed, Davis promised that someone would come and teach the people. He died July 31, 1911, from blackwater fever and was buried by Chief Jeremiah at Mt. Roraima. Carrie would return to her home in the United States.

Following Davis’s death, the Indians gathered every Sabbath by his grave to sing. Despite their numerous “appeals” for another teacher, it was 14 years before Adventist missionaries finally followed up on Davis’s work.

About 1918, an explorer found a group of Indians who were singing “There’s Not a Friend Like the Lowly Jesus” in English. Finding this strange, he discovered that they would bring out the effects of Brother Davis and hold a simple service.

In 1922, after more than a decade of waiting, Chief Jeremiah hiked for four weeks to the Adventist mission office in Georgetown to plead for a teacher. In 1924, the division committee decided they must not wait another year despite budget cuts. W. E. Baxter and C. B. Sutton visited Mt. Roraima the following year. They arrived at the grave of Davis on October 25, 1925, after a lengthy journey to find the Davis Indians. Chief Jeremiah and his son brought them a bundle of papers. In it was a letter from Davis dated July 17, 1911, certifying that 130 persons at Mt. Roraima had “solemnly declared their intentions to live true and loyal” to “the Gospel of Christ and the doctrines and principles of the Seventh-day Adventist church.” The trip up to the mission resulted in both Baxter and Sutton suffering an attack of malaria.

In August 1927, thanks to a special offering, Arthur and Elizabeth Cotts were able to continue the work at Mt. Roraima begun so many years earlier.

The death of Davis “shook Adventists” and served as “a continuing reminder . . . that they were to fulfill the gospel commission even in remote regions.”

Today the 54-bed Adventist hospital in Georgetown, Guyana, is named in Davis’s honor. Also, in 1956, the Davis Indian Training School at Paruima in the Kamarang became part of the Mount Roraima Mission. In the early 1980s, it was reported that there were more than 1,500 Adventists among the “Davis Indians.”

This story was adapted from Michael Campbell’s biographical article in the online Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists. We invite you to visit encyclopedia.adventist.org to enjoy more stories about Adventist missionaries.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *1 Corinthians 14:1*

Study Focus: *1 Corinthians 12.*

Introduction

Picture an orchestra in a grand concert hall and about to begin a performance. The musicians tune their instruments, and then the conductor raises a baton. The musicians begin to play their various instruments. The violins, cellos, trumpets, flutes, drums, and other instruments collectively produce beautiful music as they follow the conductor.

Now, imagine if the violinist suddenly said, “*I don’t want to play because I’m not playing a trumpet. My part isn’t important.*” Or what if the percussionist decided to pound the drums or clang the cymbals as loudly as possible, drowning out all the other instruments? The beautiful harmony would turn into chaos!

In the orchestra, no instrument is unnecessary. Every musician contributes to the masterpiece. But the musicians must work together. If one person refuses to play, the music suffers. The musicians don’t play for themselves. They follow the conductor’s direction to create something greater than themselves.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses a different metaphor to emphasize the same truth. In the church, each believer has been given a different spiritual gift. Some gifts are more visible, while others work quietly in the background, but every one is essential.

Lesson Themes

This week’s lesson highlights three important themes:

- 1. First Things First.** Whatever our gifts or ministry, we are called to focus on Jesus as our Savior, Healer, and, ultimately, as the One who equips us for service to help others (*1 Cor. 12:1–3*).
- 2. One Spirit, Many Gifts.** Paul reminds his readers of the fact that all the gifts ultimately have the same origin, for it is God Himself who empowers His church with these gifts to bless and reach the world (*1 Cor. 12:4–11*).
- 3. One Body, Many Parts.** Paul introduces the metaphor of the body to illustrate the diversity of the gifts within the church and challenges his readers to keep looking at the big picture (*1 Cor. 12:12–31*).

Part II: Commentary

1. Historical Background of 1 Corinthians 12: In first-century Corinth, mystical experiences, such as prophecy and ecstatic speech, were common in Greek and Roman religions. These experiences often were associated with divine possession, mystery cults, and oracles. The Oracle of Delphi, one of the most famous religious sites in Greece, featured a priestess (Pythia) who would enter a trance-like state in which she was believed to be possessed by the Greek god Apollo. In this state, she would utter ecstatic, cryptic messages. These messages were then interpreted by priests. Other temples, such as the Oracle of Dodona, also had prophetic practices in which priests or priestesses received divine messages through natural signs (wind, rustling leaves, etc.). Such ecstatic speech was considered a sign of divine favor and insight, similar to how some Corinthians viewed speaking in tongues.

Mystery cults such as those of Dionysus (Bacchus), Cybele, and Isis involved rituals, music, and frenzied worship that often led to trance states, emotional highs, and perceived communication with the gods. In the Dionysian cult, worshipers engaged in ecstatic dancing and chanting, believing they were filled with the god's presence. Some scholars suggest that certain Corinthian Christians, influenced by these traditions, may have associated spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues and prophecy, with similar ecstatic experiences. This mindset likely contributed to divisions in the Corinthian church, as some believers ranked themselves as more "spiritual," based on their gifts. Paul challenges this idea by emphasizing that all gifts come from the same Spirit (*1 Cor. 12:4–11*) and are meant for the benefit of the whole church, not for individual status.

2. First Things First: Paul introduces a new topic in 1 Corinthians 12:1 by the phrase "now concerning spiritual gifts" (*ESV*). Similar markers for a new topic can be found in 1 Corinthians 7:1, 25; 1 Corinthians 8:1; and 1 Corinthians 16:1, 12. The Greek *pneumatikōn* is a plural adjective, meaning "spiritual," and can denote either "spiritual things" or "spiritual persons." The apostle is concerned about the Corinthian church members and their lopsided self-perception of themselves as "spiritual" (*1 Cor. 14:37*). "There was a danger—and in some cases a reality—of people claiming that they had a higher spiritual status within the community, which created disparity among the believers. Paul rejected this kind of mentality."—"1 Corinthians," in *Andrews Bible Commentary*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez et al. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), p. 1642. Instead of focusing on the gifts, Paul reminds his audience that they should rejoice when God's Spirit convicts them to confess Jesus as their Savior (*1 Cor. 12:3*). No one who is truly Spirit-led can curse Jesus. In this sense, all believers are "spiritual" by virtue of the basic Christian confession that Jesus is Lord.

3. One Spirit, Many Gifts: Before elaborating on the different spiritual gifts, Paul makes a statement in 1 Corinthians 12:4–6 that includes all members of the Godhead, highlighting a diversity of gifts given by the Spirit, a diversity of services given by the Lord (i.e., Jesus), and a diversity of activities that is given by the “same God who empowers them all in everyone” (*1 Cor. 12:6, ESV*). The sequence here is thus Spirit–Son–Father. Thus, the unity of the Godhead becomes the matrix or example against which the often-divided Corinthian church could measure itself.

Paul reminds his readers that the first gift that God bestows on all believers is the confession of faith that “ ‘Jesus is Lord’ ” (*1 Cor. 12:2, 3, ESV*). This belief is in line with Jesus’ statement in John 6:44: “ ‘No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him’ ” (*ESV*). Even though we are given the freedom to choose, we must be drawn by the Spirit (or the Father) to make the first step of faith toward Jesus.

Paul then continues to describe the diversity of spiritual gifts, as well as ministries and activities within the Christian community (*1 Cor. 12:4–11*). “Paul explains that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given for the benefit of the entire church (12:7).”—“1 Corinthians,” in *Andrews Bible Commentary*, p. 1642. Thus, gifts are not a sign of spiritual mastery or superiority, but tokens of God’s grace that empower us to serve one another and also the world around us. The variety of gifts described in the chapter (including spiritual inputs involving wisdom and knowledge, healings or working miracles, prophetic speech, spiritual discernment, languages, and more) are all given to bless the community of believers. None of the gifts should be considered higher or more important than any other.

4. The Body of Christ—A Radical Idea: Paul’s metaphor of the church as a body (*1 Cor. 12:12–27*) was countercultural. In Roman society, social class and status were rigid, with the wealthy and powerful at the top. The idea that every member of the church—rich or poor, slave or free, male or female—was equally valuable was revolutionary. Paul emphasizes that, in Christ, all believers are interconnected and must honor one another, rejecting the world’s hierarchy.

As noted by New Testament scholar Jason Staples: “Paul takes this image a step further than its usual metaphorical or analogical sense. For the apostle, the ‘body of Christ’ is not just a metaphor for individuals unified by belief in Jesus but an ontological and relational reality in which persons, receiving the ‘spirit of Christ’ (Rom 8:9), thereby become incorporated into Christ himself. Believers actually become the ‘body of Christ’ by being ‘baptized into one body by one spirit’ (1 Cor 12:13).”—Staples, “Body of Christ,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023), p. 83.

The use of the body metaphor highlights the oneness of the community,

but also the oneness of the church with her Lord—especially in light of the fact that Christ is the head of the body (*Col. 1:18, Eph. 4:15*). In this sense, the body is not primarily a body of believers but the body of Christ; that is, the primary focus of the metaphor is the unity of believers with Christ.

As Paul described in the chapter, this means that ethnic, gender, and social distinctions are irrelevant for inclusion in Christ’s body. This idea was not only countercultural but also subversive and dangerous to Greco-Roman society, where status, power, shame, honor, and gender played highly important roles.

Note the following example taken from New Testament scholar Philip Ryken regarding perceptions about hierarchy, status, and gender in the world of the early Christian church: “Consider the prayer, sometimes attributed to Socrates, in which a Greek man gave thanks to God ‘that I was born a human being and not a beast, next a man and not a woman, thirdly, a Greek and not a barbarian.’ Pagans generally despised their slaves and mistreated their women. In some places slaves were forbidden to enter pagan temples, while women were treated as chattel.”—Philip Graham Ryken, *Galatians*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), p. 148. Clearly, Paul’s message to the Corinthian church was countercultural.

Part III: Life Application

Our human tendency is to put into hierarchical order the gifts that God has given the church as the body of Christ. Paul introduces the metaphor of the body and body parts to help his readers focus on unity and mission. Body parts, he writes, cannot excel on their own. In fact, they cannot survive on their own. The eye needs the eyelid; the head needs the neck; the foot needs the legs; and they all rely on the heart for sufficient oxygen and blood. Using 1 Corinthians 12 as a reference, discuss the following questions in your group:

- 1. How can we apply the Pauline body metaphor to our church realities of competing programs and differing priorities?**

- 2. What would you say to the idea that God wants to see a body, not body parts, in His church?**

- 3. What does the metaphor of the church, as the body of Christ, say to people living in the twenty-first century?**

- 4. What would be the best criteria to evaluate spiritual gifts and their importance to the church?**

- 5. How can we discover our own gifts in the context of the mission of the church?**

- 6. If possible, which gift would you like to have, and why?**

A Portrait of Love



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *1 Corinthians 13; Matt. 24:12; Gal. 5:22, 23; 1 Tim. 1:14; 1 John 4:8.*

Memory Text: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (*1 Corinthians 13:13, NIV*).

Love can conquer all. That’s why Paul had so much to say about it. The word family of *agapaō*—the most common Greek word in the New Testament to express the concept of love—occurs more than 135 times in his letters. This represents almost half of all occurrences in the New Testament. This should tell us something about the central theme of Paul’s letters to the Corinthian church.

There are many remarkable passages about love in the New Testament—Romans 8:35–39, 1 Corinthians 2:9, 1 Corinthians 8:3, Galatians 2:20, Colossians 1:13, 1 Thessalonians 3:12, and more—but nothing compares to 1 Corinthians 13.

Last week, we saw that without love, all things, even spiritual gifts, are worthless. This week, we will look more deeply into 1 Corinthians 13 and its marvelous portrait of love.

As we will see, love is not so much an emotion as an attitude, an attitude that must be expressed in life, in deeds, and in words; otherwise, it means nothing.

What love really is, and does, has been fully revealed in the life of Jesus.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 15.

The Essentialness of Love

Last week we touched on the theme of love as seen in 1 Corinthians 13. We need to explore Paul’s words here in even more depth.

Read 1 Corinthians 13. Summarize what he is telling us about love.

Paul is not saying that tongues (*1 Cor. 13:1*), prophecy, understanding, knowledge, faith (*1 Cor. 13:2*), and benevolence (*1 Cor. 13:3*) are useless. They are useless only if not driven by love.

The kind of love Paul is talking about is not expressed in such sentences as “I love strawberries” or “I love my friends” or even “I love my spouse and children.” Neither is he talking about the kind of love that one sees in movies. And no, it is not erotic love, although this passage has been commonly used in wedding sermons.

This love cannot be reduced to affection, or charity, or virtue, or benevolence. Yet, they all represent it to a lesser or greater degree. This love is a special grace bestowed upon us by the Spirit. Indeed, love in 1 Corinthians 13 is the Spirit-given motivation that leads us to act with affection, charity, virtue, and benevolence. It is a total commitment of our actions, feelings, and thoughts toward Christ and our neighbors.

Read Matthew 24:12. What warning does Jesus give us here?

That is why *agapē* love is so essential and necessary. In the power of Christ, we cannot let love grow cold in our homes, churches, and neighborhoods. We have the example of Christ on the cross, dying for us. What better and more powerful expression of this kind of love could there be? Though of course we could never equally express that kind of love, by God’s grace we should strive to reveal it in our own lives to whatever degree we can.

What are some times when, indeed, an expression of this kind of love could have made a powerfully positive impression on someone who needed this love more than anything else?

What Love Does

First Corinthians 13:4–7 is the heart of the chapter. Paul focuses on the features of love—showing what love is and what it is not, or what love does and does not do. He personifies love so that we can have a glimpse of how a person filled with Spirit-driven love behaves. In his portrayal of love, Paul uses a series of verbs. For him, love is more about actions than about feelings or emotions.

What, then, does love do?

1. Shows patience (*makrothymeō*). *Makrothymeō* means to show patience, even amid challenging circumstances. Patience also highlights the ability to be forbearing with one another (*Eph. 4:2*).

2. Shows kindness (*chrēsteuomai*). *Chrēsteuomai* occurs only here in the New Testament, but other words from the same root are common elsewhere. In the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament), words from this root occur frequently in the Psalms to refer to God’s kindness associated with His mercy (*Ps. 145:9*). By saying that love shows kindness, Paul meant that one’s love for others must emulate God’s compassion and mercy toward us.

3. Rejoices (*synchairō*) in the truth. *Synchairō* denotes the ability to experience joy alongside another person (*Luke 1:58; Luke 15:6, 9; 1 Cor. 12:26; Phil. 2:17, 18*).

4. Bears (*stegō*) all things. Scholars debate whether *stegō* means “to cover,” namely, to keep something confidential (which also has a sense of protection), or “to endure,” with a sense of resilience. The concept of endurance clearly occurs in 1 Corinthians 9:12, leading most interpreters and Bible translators to take the second option as more likely.

5. Believes (*pisteuō*) all things. *Pisteuō* comes from the same root as the Greek term for faith (*pistis*). In the context of 1 Corinthians 13, believing all things means giving one another the benefit of the doubt.

6. Hopes (*elpizō*) all things. In the New Testament, the verb *elpizō* always refers to the belief or expectation that something good will occur.

7. Endures (*hypomenō*) all things. Likely, there is no difference between the verbs *stegō* and *hypomenō* in 1 Corinthians 13:7. They are synonyms, meaning here endurance amid hardship. Paul uses *hypomenō* at the end of the verse to avoid the repetition of *stegō*. By repeating the same concept even with a different word, he draws attention to believing and hoping as the focal point. In other words, love endures by believing and hoping.

Compare 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 to Galatians 5:22, 23. What ideas in common do you see between the two passages? How can we manifest this kind of love in our own lives?

What Love Does Not Do

Read again 1 Corinthians 13:4–7. Why does Paul mention negative rather than only positive characteristics of love?

Yesterday, we focused on seven things love does; today, we will look into eight things it does not do. Love . . .

1. Does not envy (*zeloō*). *Zeloō* can be used positively as in “desire [*zeloō*] the higher gifts” (1 Cor. 12:31, *ESV*), “desire [*zeloō*] the spiritual gifts” (1 Cor. 14:1, *ESV*), and “desire [*zeloō*] to prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:39, *ESV*). Here, though, as in Acts 7:9, it is negative. It is OK to desire spiritual gifts but not to envy gifted persons. This causes division (1 Cor. 3:3).

2. Does not boast (*perpereuomai*). The verb *perpereuomai* conveys the idea of arrogance and desire for praise from others. Love, however, is not self-focused like that. This is even clearer in what follows.

3. Does not puff up (*physioō*). The verb *physioō* occurs in 1 Corinthians 8:1 in Paul’s remarkable statement, “‘Knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up” (*ESV*). It refers to a person inflated with self-importance.

4. Does not behave rudely (*aschēmoneo*). The verb *aschēmoneo* may have an ample range of meanings. By and large, though, it means acting contrary to social and moral standards in a dishonorable, shameful, indecent, or improper manner. Paul likely is referring to the arrogant and rude behavior of the “strong” party toward the “weak” members in Corinth (1 Cor. 4:10, 1 Corinthians 8).

5. Does not seek (*zēteō*) its own [rights]. This is similar to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:24: “No one is to seek his own right, but rather that of others” (author’s translation). Love gives up its own rights for the sake of others (see Lesson 5). In a setting in which everyone seeks each other’s rights, all benefit.

6. Does not get easily irritated (*paroxynō*). The verb *paroxynō* suggests an inward state of arousal pointing to someone easily provoked to anger. This means that love is not short-tempered or touchy.

7. Does not keep records (*logizomai*) of wrongs. The verb *logizomai* has an accounting sense here, meaning that love does not take one’s wrongs into account. In other words, love also means to forgive.

8. Does not delight (*chairō*) in wrongdoing. Love not only keeps no record of someone else’s wrongs but takes no pleasure in them. When we truly love others, we do not rejoice at their mistakes but, instead, seek to help them.

A Portrait of Jesus

As we read 1 Corinthians 13:4–7, we may feel frustrated at realizing that, to a lesser or greater degree, we fall short of displaying all those features of love. Likely, Paul had the person of Jesus in mind when writing 1 Corinthians 13. Indeed, only Christ perfectly revealed all those characteristics of love. Thus, ultimately, Paul’s portrayal of love is a portrait of Jesus.

Read John 13:1, 34; John 15:9, 12; 1 Timothy 1:14; 2 Timothy 1:7, 13; 1 John 3:16; and 1 John 4:7–12, 19–21. What can we learn about love from these passages?

God is love (*1 John 4:8*). He loves us so much that He gave His only Son (*John 3:16*). Jesus is the full expression of this love (*Heb. 1:3*). If we want to know how love expresses itself, we must take a long look at Jesus. If we pay close attention to the portrayal of Jesus in the New Testament, we will realize that all the positive features of love in 1 Corinthians 13 are seen in Him.

Jesus is patient. “But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience [*makrothymia*]” (*1 Tim. 1:16, NIV*).

Jesus is kind. The Bible says that “the Lord is kind” (*1 Pet. 2:3, LEB*). The word “Lord” in this passage refers to Jesus. The term “kind” renders the Greek word *chrēstos*, which comes from the same root as the verb *chrēsteuomai* (“to show kindness”) in 1 Corinthians 13:4.

Jesus rejoices in the truth. Jesus experienced joy as He followed the will of the Father and felt His love for Him (*John 15:9–11, John 17:12–14*).

Jesus bears/endures all things. Hebrews 12:2, 3 says that Jesus “endured the cross. . . [He] endured such hostility from sinners against Himself” (*NKJV*). Nobody has endured so much as Jesus (*Phil. 2:8*). He did this for the joy set before Him!

Jesus believes all things. When Ananias questioned the genuineness of Paul’s conversion (*Acts 9:13, 14*), Jesus answered, “He is a chosen instrument of mine” (*Acts 9:15, ESV*). Jesus sees people not only as they are but as they will become through His power.

What are other ways that Jesus reveals to us what true love really is?

Faith, Hope, and Love

Thus far, we have learned that love is patient, kind, joyful, resilient, believing, hopeful, and enduring (or perseverant) because Jesus is all these things. Once we see these qualities in Jesus, the next step is to imitate Him. That was Paul's wish for the Corinthians. However, if we remove the "not" in the eight negative features of love, "we get a pretty good description of the Corinthians' conduct within their church circle: envious, boasting, arrogant, rude, self-seeking, easily offended, and looking to see what others were doing wrong. Paul is tailoring the verbs he uses here to the Corinthian situation."—Verlyn D. Verbrugge, "1 Corinthians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans–Galatians*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), p. 372.

The Corinthians had much to learn. So do we. After describing what love does and does not do, Paul concludes his section by emphasizing the everlasting nature of love so as to stimulate the practice of genuine love.

One day, prophecies will no longer be necessary; we will speak only one language; and flawed human knowledge will be replaced by a brand-new knowledge of God (*1 Cor. 13:12*). The gifts of the Spirit will cease only when the purpose for which they exist has reached its fulfillment (*1 Cor. 13:10*). "But love will last forever!" (*1 Cor. 13:8, NLT*).

Likewise, when Christ returns, faith will give place to sight (*2 Cor. 5:7*), and that which we have long hoped for will be reality (*Rom. 8:24*). And, most of all, love will endure as an emblem of the character of our triune God. Yet, there is a sense in which faith and hope will also last forever. Faith as the experience of salvation (*Rom. 4:3*), and hope as the desire and expectation of new delights and knowledge in the new earth, will mark the experience of the redeemed forever. Yet love, God's love, will eternally prevail.

Very soon, we will see our Lord face-to-face (*1 Cor. 13:12*). Until that day comes, we are supposed to define our lives with these three virtues: faith, hope, and love. This triad is representative of the fullness of Christian life through the Spirit. That is why it was often referred to among Christians (*Rom. 5:1–5; Gal. 5:5, 6; Eph. 1:15, 18; 4:1–5*). Love, however, is the greatest; after all, it is the only virtue used to describe the very nature of God Himself (*1 John 4:8*).

Dwell on the statement "God is love." How are we supposed to understand exactly what that means? And though we can grasp the idea only in part, why is that phrase such good news for us?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Need of Love,” pp. 545, 546, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 28, 1888.

“No matter how high the profession, he whose heart is not filled with love for God and his fellow men is not a true disciple of Christ. Though he should possess great faith and have power even to work miracles, yet without love his faith would be worthless. He might display great liberality; but should he, from some other motive than genuine love, bestow all his goods to feed the poor, the act would not commend him to the favor of God. In his zeal he might even meet a martyr’s death, yet if not actuated by love, he would be regarded by God as a deluded enthusiast or an ambitious hypocrite.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 318, 319.

“We have an abundance of sermonizing. What is most needed . . . is love for perishing souls, that love which comes in rich currents from the throne of God. True Christianity diffuses love through the whole being. It touches every vital part, the brain, the heart, the helping hands, the feet, enabling men to stand firmly where God requires them to stand, so that they will not make crooked paths for their feet, lest the lame be turned out of the way. The burning, consuming love of Christ for perishing souls is the life of the whole system of Christianity.”—Ellen G. White, *Lift Him Up*, p. 134.

“Only the love that flows from the heart of Christ can heal. Only he in whom that love flows, even as the sap in the tree or the blood in the body, can restore the wounded soul.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 114.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Do you think Paul’s list of positive features of love is exhaustive? If not, what other elements would you add to the list?
- 2 What do you think Paul meant by the command “Pursue love” (1 Cor. 14:1, NKJV)? What does this have to do with what he says in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7?
- 3 Which characteristic of love do you most need to put into practice in your daily life? Which ones are more necessary in your local church? By the way, why does Paul compare love with such gifts as prophecy, tongues, and knowledge (1 Cor. 13:8)?
- 4 Paul hints that love is the ultimate solution for the lack of unity among members in Corinth. Why? How does this apply to our churches today?

Meeting the General

The names of the author, characters, and location have been withheld.

I started my morning with a much longer prayer time than usual. After meeting many difficulties in applying for residency in a veiled country, my wife and I were told that it might be possible for us to apply that day for a six-month temporary residence card if we presented ourselves at the immigration office.

Our situation was uniquely complicated. We knew that a technicality on my wife's passport would likely deny any request she made for residency. Our stay in the country was at risk. I didn't know where to turn except for God's direct intervention.

At the immigration office, we carefully filled out the paperwork and waited nervously. The woman behind the window who finally called our number was efficient. She quickly processed my request but hesitated when she picked up my wife's passport. As we feared, none of my explanations satisfied her questions. She waved us away with a mumbled, "You go see a general."

My heart pounding, I breathed a quick prayer. Someone showed us to an office at the end of a long hall, where a young man sat behind a large desk. He smiled and confirmed, "I am the general." As he took our passports, he cheerfully told us he was studying English and hoping to serve soon in the United Nations. He didn't ask why we'd been sent to him.

After a few minutes of paperwork, he stood and announced, "It's all done. Come back tomorrow for your residence cards." Even amid my surprise and relief, I felt a nudge by the Holy Spirit. I quickly wrote down my number on a piece of paper and handed it to him, telling him that if he ever wanted to meet and practice English, I would gladly visit.

Later that day, he messaged that he had finished our residency cards early, and we could come pick them up. The relief that had replaced our frustration and worry gave way to amazement. God had smoothed the way—and so quickly! Moreover, we soon realized He had even more in mind than our problems.

The general and I have kept in touch. We talk often and have met several times. We enjoy conversations about life and the values we share. As his English improves, our friendship grows, and God's opportunities unfold before me.

But those are small benefits next to the privilege of watching God use every circumstance to accomplish His purpose. We had approached Him with our great need because we were blocked by the challenges of doing His work, and in answering our prayer, He connected us to the very purpose of our work.

We call a country veiled when we have withheld its name to protect the lives and ministry of frontline workers serving there. To learn about Global Mission's church-planting ministry, visit bit.ly/GMPioneers.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *1 Corinthians 13:13*

Study Focus: *1 Cor. 13:1–13.*

Introduction

Anna lives with her aging grandmother. Her friends often invite her out, but she chooses to stay home, cooking, cleaning, and reading to her grandmother, who sometimes forgets her name because of dementia.

One evening, Anna’s grandmother becomes frustrated and snaps at her, forgetting all the kindness Anna has shown. Instead of getting angry or walking away, Anna gently takes her hand and says, “It’s OK, Grandma. I love you.” She continues to care for her, even when there’s no gratitude in return.

Anna doesn’t serve for recognition or reward. She doesn’t seek praise. She simply loves—patiently, kindly, without envy, pride, or resentment. Her love endures, even when it’s difficult.

Paul describes this kind of love in 1 Corinthians 13—a love that isn’t just words or emotions but a daily choice to be selfless, forgiving, and steadfast. It’s the kind of love that reflects God’s love for us, the kind that never fails.

Lesson Themes

First Corinthians 13, often called the “Love Chapter,” is one of the most profound passages in the Bible. Paul places love at the center of Christian life, showing that it is superior to spiritual gifts, knowledge, and even faith. This week, we will look at the following three main themes of the Love Chapter:

- 1. The Supremacy of Love** (*1 Cor. 13:1–3*).
- 2. The Characteristics of Love** (*1 Cor. 13:4–8*).
- 3. The Endurance of Love** (*1 Cor. 13:8–13*).

Part II: Commentary

1. Background: Love in Greek Writings and Philosophy of the First Century A.D.: In the world of the first century A.D., love was a widely discussed concept in Greco-Roman philosophy and literature and an important part of Jewish thought. However, the way love was understood varied significantly. Roman poets, such as Ovid in *Ars Amatoria* (“The Art of Love”), focused more on the idea of love as a skillful pursuit, often intertwined with manipulation and seduction. Love was frequently associated with beauty, desire, and conquest rather than selflessness.

The ancient Greeks and Romans had multiple words for love, each

reflecting different aspects of human relationships. *Eros* (ἔρως) was mostly used to denote passionate, romantic, or sexual love. *Eros* was often seen as an intense desire or even a dangerous force that could lead to irrationality. Plato, in his work *Symposium*, however, discussed *eros* as something that could lead a person from physical attraction to a pursuit of higher, divine beauty. *Philia* (φιλία) was used to describe friendship or brotherly love and often characterized relationships between equals. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle described *philia* as essential for a virtuous and fulfilling life, particularly in friendships based on mutual goodness. *Storgē* (στοργή) described familial love, such as the natural bond between parents and children. This form of love was seen as instinctive and protective. Finally, *agapē* (ἀγάπη) often had the connotation of selfless, unconditional love. While this term existed before Christianity, it was not commonly emphasized in Greek philosophical texts. Paul's writings—in particular his use of the word in 1 Corinthians 13—highlighted this love.

In Jewish thought, love was closely tied to covenant relationships, both between God and Israel and among individuals. The Hebrew Scriptures emphasized (1) *God's steadfast love (hesed)* that described His covenantal love. This love is loyal, merciful, and enduring (for example, the refrain found in Psalm 136:2, “His steadfast love endures forever” [ESV]); (2) *love of neighbor*, as found in the command of Leviticus 19:18 (“Love your neighbor as yourself” [ESV]), a principle that Jesus later reaffirmed (*Mark 12:31*); and (3) *love in both family and marriage*, as depicted in Proverbs and the Song of Songs.

By the first century, Jewish teachers, such as the Pharisees, emphasized obedience to the law as an expression of love for God (*Deut. 6:5*). Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 was revolutionary for his time. Unlike the competitive, status-driven love of the Greco-Roman world or the legalism of some Jewish teachers, Paul presented *agapē* as the highest virtue—greater than knowledge, power, or even spiritual gifts. Unlike *eros*, which sought personal fulfillment, the love Paul described in 1 Corinthians 13 was sacrificial. The opposite of self-seeking, this love went beyond mere emotion and was enduring and action-driven. It represented a way of life, requiring patience, kindness, and humility.

Paul's vision of love aligned more with God's covenantal *hesed* than with Greek philosophical ideals; yet, his vision also transcended traditional Jewish views by insisting that love—not *torah*—was the foundation of Christian ethics.

2. The Supremacy of Love (1 Cor. 13:1–3): First Corinthians 13 is part of Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts (*1 Corinthians 12–14*), in which he emphasizes that love is greater than any gift or ability. Love is greater than knowledge, power, or even faith itself. Paul describes love, not as an emotion, but as an attitude—patient, kind, selfless, and enduring. This kind of love (*agapē*) is central to the Christian life. It is not just an ideal but a call to action, challenging believers to reflect God's love in every relationship and situation.

In 1904, Ellen G. White wrote the following statement: “The Lord desires me to call the attention of His people to the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. Read this chapter every day, and from it obtain comfort and strength. Learn from it the value that God places on sanctified, heaven-born love, and let the lesson that it teaches come home to your hearts. Learn that Christlike love is of heavenly birth, and that without it all other qualifications are worthless.”—*The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 21, 1904.

Paul begins by emphasizing that without love, even the most impressive spiritual gifts and religious acts are meaningless. He lists three examples: (1) According to Paul, speaking “in the tongues of men and of angels” without love is just like “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (*1 Cor. 13:1, ESV*). (2) A person with prophetic power, knowledge, and even faith is “nothing” (*1 Cor. 13:2, ESV*) without love. (3) Acts of extreme generosity and sacrifice will “gain nothing” (*1 Cor. 13:3, ESV*) for the giver if not motivated by love. Because God is love (*1 John 4:8*), “He can be fully known only through love. . . . Without love we cannot know God, and without God we are nothing.”—“1 Corinthians,” in *Andrews Bible Commentary*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez et al. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), p. 1643. This section highlights the fact that spiritual gifts and religious devotion must be rooted in love to have true significance.

3. The Characteristics of Love (*1 Cor. 13:4–8*): In the following verses, Paul explains the nature of love. Love is not simply an emotion but an active way of living. Intriguingly, Paul uses verbs not adjectives to define the nature of love. In total, he uses 16 verbs, nine of which describe a negative value and seven with a positive or constructive value. The following table offers a visual overview (and is based on a table found in the *Andrews Bible Commentary*, p. 1644):

Positive Qualities	Negative Qualities
Love is patient (<i>vs. 4</i>)	Love does <i>not</i> envy (<i>vs. 4</i>)
Love is kind (<i>vs. 4</i>)	Love does <i>not</i> boast (<i>vs. 4</i>)
Love rejoices in the truth (<i>vs. 6</i>)	Love is <i>not</i> arrogant (<i>vs. 4</i>)
Love endures/protects all things (<i>vs. 7</i>)	Love is <i>not</i> rude/disrespectful (<i>vs. 5</i>)
Love believes all things, and always trusts (<i>vs. 7</i>)	Love is <i>not</i> self-seeking (<i>vs. 5</i>)
Love hopes all things (<i>vs. 7</i>)	Love is <i>not</i> easily angered (<i>vs. 5</i>)
Love endures all things, and always perseveres (<i>vs. 8</i>)	Love does <i>not</i> keep a record of wrongs and thinks no evil (<i>vs. 5</i>) Love does <i>not</i> delight in evil (<i>vs. 6</i>) Love <i>never</i> fails (<i>vs. 8</i>)

This list contrasts with the Corinthians' behavior. The Corinthians were struggling with pride, division, and competition over spiritual gifts. Paul calls them to a higher standard of love, a notion also affirmed in the writings of Ellen G. White: "The attribute that Christ appreciates most in man is charity (love) out of a pure heart. This is the fruit borne upon the Christian tree."—Manuscript 16, 1892.

4. The Endurance of Love (1 Cor. 13:8-13): Paul concludes by showing that love is eternal, whereas spiritual gifts are temporary. "Love never ends" (*ESV*), writes Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:8, but gifts (prophecies, tongues, knowledge) will pass away. These gifts are needed only in our imperfect, earthly state, but they will no longer be necessary when we reach full knowledge in God's presence. In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul reminds his audience that human sight, at its best, sees only "dimly." He contrasts this dim awareness with the assurance that we will see "face to face" in the kingdom. Paul compares our current understanding to looking at a blurred reflection in a mirror. In eternity, we will fully know God and be fully known by Him. Of the three virtues of faith, hope, and love, only love will remain, for love "is the greatest" of the virtues. While faith and hope are vital in our current lives, love is the only one that will continue forever in eternity.

Part III: Life Application

Paul's discourse on love in 1 Corinthians 13 emphasizes that love is the foundation of Christian faith and relationships. Love (or *agapē*) is not about emotions, attraction, or personal benefit. Rather, it is a self-giving, enduring, and transformative principle that mirrors God's love for us. Paul challenges believers to embody this love in their daily lives, making it the highest virtue in both their faith and actions.

- 1. Paul says that even great spiritual gifts and acts of sacrifice are meaningless without love. Why do you think love is more important than knowledge, faith, or generosity?**

- 2. Can you think of examples in which people do "good things" but without love? How does that affect the impact of their actions?**

3. How does 1 Corinthians 13 challenge the way we define success?

4. Which of the descriptions of love (for example, patience, kindness, not self-seeking) stands out to you the most? Why?

5. Which of the aforementioned characteristics is the hardest for you to practice in your daily life? How can you grow in that area?

6. How can you practice *agapē* love in situations in which you don't feel like loving (for example, difficult relationships, disagreements, daily frustrations)?

7. Think about a person in your life who truly exemplifies the kind of love that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13. What can you learn from this person?

8. How does understanding God's love help us to love others better?

The Power of Christ's Resurrection



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Corinthians 15; Luke 24:44–47; Rev. 20:5, 6; Col. 2:12; 2 Tim. 1:12; 1 Thess. 4:13–17.*

Memory Text: “And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. . . . And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!” (*1 Corinthians 15:14–17, NKJV*).

How fascinating that, even in his time, Paul had to deal with those who denied the resurrection of the dead. After all, people back then saw what death did to the human body. They knew how the corpse liquifies, then dries up into dust, and then becomes almost nothing. And they knew that people have been dead for a long time, too. In fact, most people have been dead a lot longer than they were alive.

The resurrection of the dead seemed no more plausible to them back then than it does to us now, at least from a human standpoint. And that must have been an issue that Paul was addressing.

And it was crucial, too. If Jesus is not risen, He is not who He said He was, the Cross had no effect, and our sins have not been paid for. Despair is really all we would have remaining. But our Lord is risen, ascended into heaven, and will return to take us home!

This week we will focus on 1 Corinthians 15 and its teaching on the resurrection of Christ. Influenced by the surrounding pagan worldview, some in Corinth were saying that there is no resurrection. In response, Paul affirms the resurrection of Christ as our only hope of salvation.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 22.

Proclaiming the Resurrection of Christ

Paul begins 1 Corinthians 15 by focusing on the gospel. He speaks about the gospel: (1) *which* he preached to the Corinthians; (2) *which* they received; (3) in *which* they stood; and (4) by *which* they were saved (*1 Cor. 15:1, 2, NKJV*). This opening prepares the reader for what comes next in the chapter and shows how essential Christ's resurrection is for our salvation (see also *Rom. 10:9, 10*). His resurrection is such a vital part of the gospel message that denying it contradicts one's faith in Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1–4, Luke 24:44–47, and Romans 1:1–4. What do these passages have in common?

In 1 Corinthians 15:1–4, one can find a summary of Paul's message. Whether the phrase "according to the Scriptures" refers to particular Old Testament passages or to the Old Testament as a whole doesn't matter. Jesus' death and resurrection fulfill God's promises found in the Old Testament.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:2, 11. Why do these verses place the concepts of believing and preaching side by side? What is the relationship between the two?

All who proclaim that Christ is risen must first believe that His resurrection is a historical event. In this case, 1 Corinthians 15:5–8 plays a critical role in the New Testament. This passage provides solid scriptural evidence that Christ was seen by numerous people after His resurrection, many of whom were still alive by the time Paul wrote the letter (*1 Cor. 15:6*).

Basically, Paul is saying, *Go ask them for yourselves what they saw*. That is how confident he was in the reality of Christ's resurrection.

These people were eyewitnesses. They were what Jesus said they would be, namely, "witnesses of these things" (*Luke 24:48*).

What reasons do we have for believing in Christ's resurrection? Also, what other things, secular or sacred, do we believe even if we haven't seen them ourselves?

The Risen Christ, Our Only Hope!

In 1 Corinthians 15:9–19, Paul explains how severe and dreadful the consequences of denying the Resurrection are. Without the Resurrection, believers have no hope in the present, much less in the future.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:9–19. What do we lose if Christ has not been raised?

By and large, ancient pagans did not believe in resurrection, especially in the Greek world, with its belief in body-soul dualism (at death the soul soars off to wherever the souls of the dead supposedly go). Paul begins the paragraph in 1 Corinthians 15:12–19 with a rhetorical question that shows his deep bewilderment: “What? How can some of you say that there is no such thing as the resurrection of the dead?” (1 Cor. 15:12, author’s translation). For Paul, disbelieving in the Resurrection is inconceivable, especially because there were so many eyewitnesses (1 Cor. 15:5–8). But even worse, without the Resurrection, their hope is built on a lie, and they are still in their sins.

He says, in fact, that if there is no resurrection of the dead, then (1) Christ has not been raised (1 Cor. 15:13, 16); (2) our preaching is empty (1 Cor. 15:14); (3) our faith is also empty (1 Cor. 15:14); (4) we are false witnesses (1 Cor. 15:15); (5) our faith is futile (1 Cor. 15:17); (6) we are still in our sins (1 Cor. 15:17); and, obviously, (7) those who have died are no more (1 Cor. 15:18).

Without the Resurrection, both preaching and faith are empty (1 Cor. 15:14). The Greek term rendering the word “empty” is *kenos*. This is a good translation, but it is too broad. Interpreters debate whether *kenos* means “empty” in the sense of lacking truth (so, “untrue”) or lacking results (so, “without result or effect”) or lacking purpose (so, “without purpose,” “in vain”).

Whatever the specific meaning, in a scenario in which resurrection does not exist, faith is portrayed as futile, from the Greek *mataios* (1 Cor. 15:17). Although *mataios* is not much different from *kenos*, the idea is that if Jesus is not alive, faith is fruitless, a delusion, because our sins have not been forgiven (1 Cor. 15:17). We would be false witnesses, deceiving and being deceived (1 Cor. 15:15).

How does one make sense of 1 Corinthians 15 if the dead soar off to heaven (or to hell) immediately? Why, then, is understanding that the dead sleep such an important teaching?

Christ, the Firstfruits

If Jesus were not alive, any expectation about the future would be only delusion (*1 Cor. 15:12–19*). “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead” (*1 Cor. 15:20, ESV*). His resurrection is a historical event. Consequently, we can be sure that all who have died in Christ will be resurrected at His coming (*1 Cor. 15:20–23*).

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20–23. What does it mean to say that Jesus is the “firstfruits”?

The end of the present evil age will be marked by the bodily resurrection of those who died in Christ (*1 Cor. 15:22, 23; Rev. 20:5, 6*). As the last Adam, Christ will deliver the kingdom back to the Father by bringing the rulership of this world back to Him (*1 Cor. 15:25–28*). Christ’s subjecting Himself to God (*1 Cor. 15:28*) must be understood in terms of how Adam and Christ are depicted in relationship to each other. As the ultimate Adam in the plan of redemption (*1 Cor. 15:45*), Jesus submits Himself entirely to the will of the Father, something that the first Adam failed to do.

In 1 Corinthians 15:29–34, Paul resumes his thought about the foolishness of denying Christ’s resurrection. He uses the illustration of baptism because it is itself a symbol of a believer’s union with Christ in His death and resurrection (*Rom. 6:3, 4; Col. 2:12*); it makes no sense to deny the reality of the Resurrection. What is difficult to grasp, however, is what Paul meant by the expression “baptized for the dead” (*1 Cor. 15:29*).

“Different suggestions have been offered, but it is better to interpret the expression as referring to the decision of some to be baptized so that they would be able to be reunited with dead loved ones at the resurrection. It could also be that the decision to be baptized was a response to the exemplary life of those who had died in Christ. This case would refer to people not being baptized in place of the dead but because of the dead.”—Carl P. Cosaert, “1 Corinthians,” *Andrews Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), p. 1652.

Second, risking death would be pointless if there were no resurrection (*1 Cor. 15:30–32*). It would be better, instead, to delight in the pleasures of this world (*1 Cor. 15:32*).

Reflect on Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 1:12. How could he be so sure about the future? How can we?

The Resurrected Body

In 1 Corinthians 15:35–39, Paul turns to a brief discourse on the resurrected body. He begins this section by posing two questions: “‘How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?’” (1 Cor. 15:35, *NKJV*). These questions are answered in 1 Corinthians 15:36–49.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:36–41. How does this passage answer the questions in 1 Corinthians 15:35?

Paul applies three analogies to help his readers understand what happens in the resurrection. The first analogy (1 Cor. 15:36–38) remarks that the body is like a seed that must first die (or cease to be a seed) in order to miraculously become a plant. The teaching is clear: resurrection is a miracle of God. Second, the analogy of the bodies (1 Cor. 15:39, 40) highlights that, in this world, God provided different types of bodies for animals and for humans appropriate to the current environment. Likewise, our bodies will be suitable for the new circumstances in the heavenly world. This idea is taken a step further with the third analogy of a glorious body (1 Cor. 15:40, 41), which emphasizes that the glory of the resurrected body enormously exceeds that of the body that came before, our earthly fallen ones.

This idea can also be seen through four contrasts between our earthly body here and now, and the resurrected body. The former is terrestrial, perishable, weak, and natural. In turn, the latter is heavenly, imperishable, powerful, and spiritual (1 Cor. 15:40–44). This does not mean there is no continuity between the two. Paul’s use of the Greek term *sōma* (“body”) for both the buried body and the resurrected body shows continuity. Conversely, the four contrasts above also show discontinuity. Our new bodies will not be the same as the decaying ones we have now (thank the Lord).

Paul does not relate the term “spiritual” to an immaterial existence. Elsewhere, he says that Jesus “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21, *ESV*). We will have real bodies, but they will not wear down or decay. Because all we know now is decay, sickness, and death, it’s hard to imagine life without these things, but that is what we are promised in Jesus.

How does the assurance that our bodies will be transformed into perfection help us be resilient regarding our physical limitations today?

Final Victory Over Death

Read 1 Corinthians 15:54–57. What does this passage tell us about our ultimate victory over death?

Paul begins the last paragraph in 1 Corinthians 15 with an intriguing statement: “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (*1 Cor. 15:50, NKJV*). Many Bible readers use this declaration to say that Paul defends an immaterial existence in heaven. But the context indicates otherwise. The parallelism of 1 Corinthians 15:50 suggests that “flesh and blood” is in parallel with “corruption,” such as “the kingdom of God” is in parallel with “incorruption.” Just as happened in 1 Corinthians 15:42–49, here, as well, Paul is contrasting the body now (or even the corpse) to the resurrected body. The buried body is marked by corruption and mortality, whereas the resurrected body is characterized by incorruption and immortality (*1 Cor. 15:50, 53, 54*). Simply put, Paul is saying that our bodies need to undergo a radical transformation in order to inherit heaven.

In short, Paul uses the ideas of corruption and mortality to refer to our sinful nature. In Jewish writings, “flesh and blood” is a phrase for fallen humanity, which is why our bodies must be transformed and purged of all imperfection at His return.

Only when our sinful nature is removed (*1 Cor. 15:54*) and we go through the experience of glorification (*1 Cor. 15:51–53, 1 Thess. 4:13–17*) will the proclamation “‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (*1 Cor. 15:54, NKJV*) be fulfilled. Then, this bold and defiant hymn will be sung: “‘O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’” (*1 Cor. 15:55, NKJV*). This all will take place at the second coming of Christ (*1 Cor. 15:51, 52*).

Think about it: we close our eyes in death, and the next thing we will experience is the second coming of Jesus, when He raises us from the dead. No matter when a believer died, even thousands of years ago, “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,” they will be made alive “at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (*1 Cor. 15:52, NKJV*).

Who hasn’t bemoaned how quickly life passes us by? In our own experience, that’s how quickly the second coming of Jesus will seem. Perhaps our first thought at His return will be “Wow, Lord, Your coming really was soon!” How does this idea help us better come to terms with what is seen as “the delay”?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “God’s People Delivered,” pp. 635–652, in *The Great Controversy*.

“The divinity of Christ is the believer’s assurance of eternal life. ‘He that believeth in Me,’ said Jesus, ‘though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die. Believest thou this?’ Christ here looks forward to the time of His second coming. Then the righteous dead shall be raised incorruptible, and the living righteous shall be translated to heaven without seeing death. The miracle which Christ was about to perform, in raising Lazarus from the dead, would represent the resurrection of all the righteous dead.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 530.

“The earth mightily shook as the voice of the Son of God called forth the sleeping saints. They responded to the call and came forth clothed with glorious immortality, crying, ‘Victory, victory, over death and the grave! O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?’ (See 1 Cor. 15:55.) Then the living saints and the risen ones raised their voices in a long transporting shout of victory. Those bodies that had gone down into the grave bearing the marks of disease and death came up in immortal health and vigor. The living saints are changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and caught up with the risen ones, and together they meet their Lord in the air. Oh, what a glorious meeting! Friends whom death had separated were united, never more to part.”—Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption*, pp. 411, 412.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** Think about those who were eyewitnesses to Christ’s resurrection (*Acts 1:22, Acts 2:32, Acts 3:15, Acts 4:33, Acts 5:30–32*). How can we, about two thousand years after that event, be “witnesses” of His resurrection?
- 2** The resurrection of Christ is an integral part of the gospel message (*1 Cor. 15:1–4*). Without the Resurrection, the proclamation of Christ’s death would be irrelevant (*1 Cor. 15:14*). The death of Christ itself would be irrelevant. Why? What does your answer to this say about the power of Christ’s resurrection?
- 3** Think a bit about Paul’s intriguing statement “If the dead do not rise, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!’ ” (*1 Cor. 15:32, NKJV*). What is the point?
- 4** In class, talk about the state of the dead. Why does 1 Corinthians 15 make no sense if, at death, the saved are immediately taken to heaven?

Spirit-led Encounters

The names of the author, characters, and location have been withheld.

My wife and I prayed earnestly that God would help us establish a home church in the veiled country where I serve as a witness. We knew only foreigners would attend initially, but we had faith that God would send us local people whose hearts He had been working on. It took some time, but He provided!

I met Salman one day when I ordered a taxi service. As he drove me to my destination, we started a conversation that soon diverted to religious topics. He shared that he had become a Christian two years ago after searching online for answers to his spiritual questions.

Salman and I slowly formed a friendship. One time, I asked him whether he was part of a community of believers or had Christian friends. I was shocked when he said he had never met a Christian before! My wife and I felt compelled to invite him to our home worship gatherings, and he began attending regularly. We were delighted that when he married, he brought his wife, and she, too, fell in love with Jesus.

One day, Salman decided to tell his brother Faisal about his love for Christ. To his surprise, Faisal told him he was already a Christian! He explained that he also sought answers to spiritual questions online and gave his heart to Jesus.

Salman told Faisal about our home church, and Faisal joined our group. He had no doubt that God had brought us together. He had recently visited a church seeking Christian fellowship, but the leader told him not to return because it was forbidden for people of Faisal's faith to be there. We praised God for helping us provide a place of belonging for Faisal.

After two years of silence and prayer, Salman and Faisal decided to tell their family about their newfound faith. By the grace of God, their parents accepted their decision, but other family members turned their backs on them.

Please pray that Faisal and Salman and his wife will continue to grow in their relationships with Jesus and that my wife and I will experience many more Spirit-led encounters with God's children in this closed country.

We call a country veiled when we have withheld its name to protect the lives and ministry of frontline workers serving there. To learn about Global Mission's church-planting ministry, visit bit.ly/GMPioneers.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *1 Cor. 15:14–17*

Study Focus: *1 Corinthians 15.*

Introduction

A little girl was watching her grandma plant tulip bulbs in the garden. Confused, she asked, “Grandma, why are you burying perfectly good onions?” Grandma laughed and said, “They’re not onions—they’re tulips! You bury them now, and in the spring, they come back beautiful.” The girl squinted at the bulbs that her grandmother was burying. “Those ugly things die and then come back *fancy*?” “Exactly,” said Grandma. The little girl thought for a moment and then asked, “Is this what happens to us when Jesus wakes us up from the dead? Do we come back . . . fancier?”

That’s not a bad way to put it, actually—and Paul would probably smile at the little girl’s fanciful turn of phrase. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says something radical: the resurrection is real, and our broken, “ordinary” bodies will be raised up glorious—transformed, perfected, and better than we could ever imagine. That’s the Christian hope: death isn’t the end. For the believer, death is only the waiting period or winter sleep before the great transformation.

Lesson Themes

First Corinthians 15 is theologically one of the richest chapters in the New Testament. It focuses primarily on the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of believers at Jesus’ second coming. This lesson will look at four main themes in this chapter:

- 1. The Resurrection of Christ.** Paul starts by affirming the historical reality of Christ’s resurrection, citing eyewitnesses (*1 Cor. 15:1–11*). This affirmation is foundational to the gospel message and essential to Christian faith.
- 2. The Resurrection of the Dead.** Paul argues that if Christ rose from the dead, then believers also will be raised (*1 Cor. 15:12–34*). He counters claims that there is no resurrection, explaining their fallacious implications: without bodily resurrection from death and the grave, faith is futile, and believers are still in sin.
- 3. The Nature of the Resurrection Body.** Paul then explains what kind of body the dead will be raised with (*1 Cor. 15:35–49*). He uses metaphors (such as a seed becoming a plant) to show the transformation from a perishable body to an imperishable, glorified one.

4. Victory Over Death. The climax of this chapter is a triumphant declaration that death has been defeated through Christ (*1 Cor. 15:50–57*). “ ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’ ” (*1 Cor. 15:54, ESV*) is a key line—resurrection transforms human destiny. Paul ends with encouragement (*1 Cor. 15:58*): because the resurrection is real, believers should stand firm and know their labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Part II: Commentary

1. Background: The message of 1 Corinthians 15 stands in sharp contrast to prevailing pagan beliefs in first-century A.D. Corinth, which was a culturally Greek, yet philosophically diverse, city. Paul’s teaching of the resurrection clashed with the surrounding worldview.

Greek (especially Platonic) thought saw the body as inferior, or even a prison for the soul. Salvation, in this view, meant escaping the material body and entering a purely spiritual bodyless existence. Paul, however, insists on a bodily resurrection—not just a spiritual continuation, but a transformation of the physical into something imperishable. This idea would have been radical, even repugnant, to many in the Corinthian intellectual scene.

Many Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul, but not in a resurrection. To them, resurrection of the body sounded like regression, not liberation. Paul says the opposite. He underlines a wholistic biblical view of humans as whole beings, not as beings with souls that can exist without bodies. For Paul, the resurrection is the final victory, where even death itself is defeated—not by escape but by transformation of the whole person.

In wider Greco-Roman paganism, views on the afterlife varied. Some minds were skeptical or agnostic; others believed in vague or shadowy existences after death (such as Hades). In contrast, Paul’s teaching is hopeful and confident: the resurrection is certain, glorious, and physical. It was rooted in Christ’s own resurrection, which was witnessed and proclaimed. Pagan views often led to a sense of fatalism—death was final, or life after death was unclear and powerless to affect daily life.

Paul ends the chapter by urging steadfastness and purpose, reminding his audience that “in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (*1 Cor. 15:58, ESV*). The resurrection gives meaning, hope, and motivation for living faithfully. Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 15 was countercultural—a bold confrontation with the intellectual assumptions of Corinth. Instead of disembodied souls floating off nebulously into the ether, Paul paints a picture of a new creation in which death is defeated and in which the people are redeemed.

2. The Resurrection of Christ: First Corinthians 15:1–11 is a foundational passage wherein Paul sets the stage for the entire chapter. This

section is both personal and theological, as Paul reaffirms the gospel message and emphasizes the resurrection of Jesus as its core. He begins by reminding the Corinthians of the gospel they already know. He's not introducing something new but reconnecting believers to that from which they were at risk of drifting away. He stresses the notion that belief must be steadfast—not just a brief moment of acceptance but a continual trust. In 1 Corinthians 15:3, 4, we find one of the earliest summaries of Christian beliefs in the New Testament, based on the following four key historical elements:

1. *Christ died.* His death was not just a martyrdom but *for our sins*.
2. *He was buried.* His burial confirms that He truly died.
3. *He was raised.* His resurrection is the central miracle.
4. *All these events happened in accordance with the Scriptures.* Thus, Christ's death, entombment, and resurrection were God's plan from the beginning.

Christ's death and resurrection were not opinion or philosophy—these events are actual history, anchored in Scripture and prophecy. The Resurrection was public, physical, and verifiable. In 1 Corinthians 15:9–11, Paul uses his life story as an example of resurrection power at work, demonstrating that the resurrection is not only a doctrine to believe; it's a transforming power that reshapes lives.

3. The Resurrection of the Dead: In 1 Corinthians 15:35–49, Paul tackles a major question the Corinthians, influenced as they were by Greek philosophy, likely had about the resurrection. “Although bodily resurrection has been the issue all along, the term ‘body’ appears for the first time in this chapter and becomes the dominant focus of 15:35–49.”—Mark Taylor in *The New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen et al. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2014), p. 401.

Paul begins by using an agricultural metaphor to confront a worldview that looks down on the physical body. The metaphor is that of a seed that must “die” to bring new life. Resurrection doesn't mean that God recycles the current body—it means He transforms it into something glorious. Pointing to God's creative diversity, Paul assures the readers that God can give us new bodies. He directly contrasts our current bodies with our resurrected bodies. We now bear the image of the earthly man (Adam), but we will bear the image of the heavenly Man (Christ). Just as we inherited Adam's broken body, we will inherit Christ's resurrected, glorified body. Ultimately, we will look less like Adam and more like Jesus—in glory, strength, and a Spirit-filled life.

4. Victory Over Death: After explaining the nature of the resurrected

body, in the last part of the chapter (*1 Cor. 15:50–58*) Paul proclaims the ultimate victory over death and the hope that flows from it. The “flesh and blood” in verse 50 refers to our current, decaying human condition—not that bodies are bad, but they need transformation.

This transformation happens at the return of Christ, at which time believers, both dead and living, will be instantly transformed. Paul then uses a clothing metaphor, stating that we must be “dressed” for eternity. Resurrection means being clothed in immortality, not just surviving death, but being made gloriously whole. Combining partial quotes from Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14, Paul shows that death is swallowed up—not just wounded, but completely consumed—by Christ’s resurrection. The “sting” of death is like a bee; it hurts, but Christ has removed its venom.

First Corinthians 15:56 can prove challenging on first reading, with the power of sin being connected to the law. As noted by New Testament scholar Mark Taylor, “Paul does not elaborate further on the relationship between the triad of death, sin, and the law. Undoubtedly the Corinthians ‘would understand this theological shorthand’ based on prior instruction. The details are worked out and preserved for us in other texts, especially Romans 5–7. Even though Paul’s derision of death and his assertion of victory is in the present tense, the final victory awaits the return of Christ when those who belong to him will be raised (15:23). In other words, Paul contemplates death’s defeat in the light of resurrection day.”—Taylor in *The New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, p. 415. Paul makes the point that the law revealed sin and so showed that humanity was condemned, thus giving sin its power. Without Christ, sin leads to death and judgment. With Christ, sin is forgiven, and death is defanged. The resurrection isn’t just theology—it’s a reason for worship, for hope, and for fearless living.

Part III: Life Application

First Corinthians 15 represents a crucial chapter in Paul’s thinking about the resurrection of believers at the second coming of Christ. The following questions are intended to spark both theological reflection and personal application:

- 1. Why does Paul place emphasis on the eyewitnesses to Jesus’ resurrection?**
-

2. How would you explain the importance of the resurrection to someone questioning the Christian faith?

3. How does Paul's personal story (*1 Cor. 15:9, 10*) add weight to his message?

4. What are the implications, according to Paul, if there is no resurrection (*1 Cor. 15:14–19*)?

5. Are there ways that modern culture reflects similar doubts about the resurrection that the Corinthians had?

6. How does the resurrection shape your understanding of life, death, and what comes after?

7. How do the metaphors Paul uses (such as a seed becoming a plant) help you to understand the idea of transformation?

8. How does this passage encourage you when facing grief or loss?

9. How can belief in the resurrection give purpose and foster a spirit of perseverance and fortitude in everyday life?

Love-driven Ministry



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Cor. 1:3–14, 2 Cor. 2:17, 2 Cor. 4:2, 1 Cor. 16:5–7, 2 Cor. 7:5–13, 2 Cor. 2:5–17.*

Memory Text: “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears, not that you should be grieved, but that you might know the love which I have so abundantly for you” (*2 Corinthians 2:4, NKJV*).

The apostle Paul didn't always have it so easy. Besides jail and the life-threatening situations he faced, Paul also wrote: “From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches” (*2 Cor. 11:24–28, NKJV*).

What we see in his letters to the Corinthians is some of the “deep concern” that Paul had for this church. Yet, amid it all, his love for them never failed, just as Christ's love for us never fails us. In fact, it was from Jesus that Paul learned to love the churches in a way that reflects the love that Jesus has for us (*2 Cor. 5:14; see 1 Cor. 11:1*).

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 29.

Thanksgiving

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3–7. What is the reason for Paul’s attitude of thanksgiving here?

Paul’s thankfulness focuses on the comfort that God provides for those who are suffering. In this passage, the verb *parakaleō* (to comfort) and the noun *paraklēsis* (comfort) occur together ten times. This represents one third of all occurrences of these words in 2 Corinthians (29 times). God is portrayed as the “Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation” (2 Cor. 1:3, 4, NKJV).

The comfort one receives from God is not to be kept for oneself (2 Cor. 1:4, 5). Only the afflicted heart that became the recipient of God’s consolation is able to impart comfort effectively to those in affliction, too.

Paul could comfort others because he himself, in his sufferings, received comfort from God. “If we are afflicted, it is for *your* consolation and salvation. . . . Or if we are comforted, it is for *your* consolation and salvation” (2 Cor. 1:6, NKJV; *emphasis supplied*). This is love!

What is Paul expressing thanks for in 2 Corinthians 1:8–11?

Paul speaks of trouble “beyond measure, above strength” that made him and his fellow workers fear that the end had come to them (2 Cor. 1:8). For a moment, they thought the resurrection was their only hope. However, God delivered them, and the scenario changed (2 Cor. 1:10). From the fear of death (2 Cor. 1:8), they rise to an implicit hope that God would deliver them once again (2 Cor. 1:10). God’s victories in the past give us confidence that He will do the same in the future. God uses afflictions to teach us to trust in Him. Hardships can lead us to spiritual maturity, at least to the extent that we allow them to draw us closer to God. Paul’s thanksgiving also displays the power of intercessory prayer and the gratitude we experience because of God’s deliverance (2 Cor. 1:11).

What have you found helpful in dealing with the suffering that, one way or another, we all face?

Simplicity and Sincerity

Yesterday, we learned that Paul's love for the Corinthians was made manifest in that he comforted them in their hardships, just as he received comfort from God in his (*2 Cor. 1:1–11*). Today, we will see that his love for them was also displayed through the integrity that he and his fellow workers manifested toward the church members in Corinth.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:12–14 in the light of 2 Corinthians 2:17 and 2 Corinthians 4:2. How does Paul's sincerity reveal his love for the Corinthians?

Second Corinthians 1:12–14 introduces the thesis Paul will develop in the rest of the letter. His integrity and apostleship have been questioned by some in Corinth. They thought Paul had a vacillating and indecisive character, which was not fitting for the apostolic ministry. In response, Paul stresses that he and his colleagues behaved with the utmost integrity toward them.

Two words portray the conduct of Paul and his associates: simplicity and sincerity (*2 Cor. 1:12*). The term “simplicity” comes from the Greek word *haplotēs*. It is applied here to express personal integrity in speech or behavior; in short, it reveals the purity of motives (*Eph. 6:5, Col. 3:22*). In turn, the term “sincerity” (from the Greek *eilikrineia*) also points to integrity and purity of motives.

The Corinthians should not have doubted the clarity of Paul's intentions. He makes it clear that his simplicity and sincerity have their origin in God. This idea is well captured by the New English Translation Bible, which mentions “pure motives and sincerity *which are from God*” (*2 Cor. 1:12, emphasis supplied*). In the same verse, Paul further asserts that these ministerial qualities are given to us “by the grace of God.”

It seems Paul's opponents misinterpreted his words, in previous written communications (*2 Cor. 1:13, 14*). Paul guarantees that his intentions were clear and understandable. He was sure that the uprightness of his words, intentions, and actions would be made clear “in the day of the Lord Jesus” (*2 Cor. 1:14, NKJV*).

What has been your own experience with having your motives or intentions, however well-meaning and sincere, questioned or challenged? What should that tell you about how careful you should be when questioning someone else's motives?

Changing Plans for Love

We saw that some in Corinth doubted Paul's intentions and love. Today, we will look into one particular reason: his changing travel plans (*2 Cor. 1:15–2:4*).

Read 1 Corinthians 16:5–7. What was Paul's original travel plan?

Paul had been in Corinth before. According to 1 Corinthians 16:5, 6, he planned to pass through Macedonia on his way back to Corinth and, perhaps, stay in Corinth for the winter. From Corinth, he would go to Judea with the offering collected for the poor in Jerusalem not only in Macedonia, but also in Achaia, Galatia, and Asia. However, he changed his plans because of a bad report brought by Timothy from Corinth (*1 Cor. 4:17, 1 Cor. 16:10, 2 Cor. 1:1*).

Paul intended to go straight from Ephesus to Corinth and there address the issues reported by Timothy. The new itinerary would be Ephesus—Corinth—Macedonia—Corinth—Judea (*2 Cor. 1:15, 16*). He went from Ephesus to Corinth, but then he returned to Ephesus. His plans changed. He didn't go back to Corinth as planned, at least not immediately, because his latest visit did not go well. So, he returned to Ephesus and wrote to them instead. He would rather send a letter than risk worsening things with another visit (*2 Cor. 2:1, 3*).

Paul's intentions on the last visit were misinterpreted. Some in Corinth said that he was unreliable and that he did not love them enough (*2 Cor. 1:17*). In his response to the accusations, he moved the Corinthians' eyes to the gospel of Christ. He was faithful to his intentions to visit the Corinthians at the best opportunity, just as God had been faithful in fulfilling His promises to them through Christ (*2 Cor. 1:18–22*).

"For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us" (*2 Cor. 1:20, NKJV*).

Thus, his response was not a confusing mixture of "yes" or "no" dependent on the circumstances, as they said, but was "always Yes," just as God's work in Christ is "always Yes" (*2 Cor. 1:19, ESV*).

Therefore, the reason Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians instead of visiting them was his sincere love for them, not the opposite (*2 Cor. 2:4*). Another visit right after the painful visit would bring them further pain, not the joy he intended to cause with his presence (*2 Cor. 1:24, 2 Cor. 2:3*). How easily his good intentions were misinterpreted.

Forgiveness and Reaffirmation of Love

Rather than visiting the Corinthians a second time, Paul, after returning to Ephesus, sent what became known as “the severe letter” (see *2 Cor. 2:3, 4; 2 Cor. 7:8, 12*).

Read 2 Corinthians 7:5–13. What was the result of what he wrote to them, and what was Paul’s reaction because of that result?

Paul and Titus met later in Macedonia, where Paul heard from Titus the excellent news that his strong words had caused positive results, which brought much joy to the apostle’s heart. If before, some in Corinth positioned themselves against Paul, now the church sided with him. How important it is to support our leaders. As church members, we can make their work much easier than it is.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:5–11. What is the central idea here?

This passage has to do with a case of church discipline. Scholars debate whether the offender here is the incestuous man of 1 Corinthians 5:1–5 or someone else, a person who influenced others in the church in their accusation that Paul had been inconsistent and inconsiderate of them in his traveling decisions. The context seems to favor the second option. In any case, the most important teaching of the passage regards how the church should deal with a person in sin.

This passage teaches that the purpose of church discipline is restoration through forgiveness and through reaffirmation of love for the sinner (*2 Cor. 2:6–8, 10*). The passage also hints that church discipline may be painful, but it is necessary. That is, however well-intentioned they may be, and wanting to be “grace”-oriented, some churches might never confront or deal with blatant or even public sin. On the other hand, others can be very rigid, unforgiving, and harsh. Sin needs to be dealt with, but in love. Thus, Paul could exhort the church to reaffirm its love for the offender (*2 Cor. 2:8*) because he himself loved the church (*2 Cor. 2:4*)!

The church in Corinth could love the offender (*2 Cor. 2:8*) because it was itself the object of God’s love through Paul’s love. What does this teach us about love?

Triumph in Christ

Read 2 Corinthians 2:12, 13. Where did Paul go after writing “the severe letter” to them? What did he do there?

Paul’s heart was uneasy while waiting for Titus (2 Cor. 7:5, 6). Despite that uneasiness, he couldn’t stop talking about Jesus (2 Cor. 2:12). He loved Jesus so much. At that point, he didn’t yet know the results of his letter. He was anxious to see Titus and hear about the reaction of the Corinthians.

The work of Paul at Troas was successful, but “he could not remain there long. ‘The care of all the churches,’ and particularly of the church at Corinth, rested heavily on his heart. He had hoped to meet Titus at Troas and to learn from him how the words of counsel and reproof sent to the Corinthian brethren had been received, but in this he was disappointed. ‘I had no rest in my spirit,’ he wrote concerning this experience, ‘because I found not Titus my brother.’ He therefore left Troas and crossed over to Macedonia, where, at Philippi he met Timothy.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 323.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:14–17. What was Paul’s reaction upon meeting Titus in Macedonia and hearing about the positive response of the Corinthians?

In a burst of joy, Paul affirms that God “always leads us in triumph in Christ” (2 Cor. 2:14, *NKJV*). What a marvelous statement! A heart filled with the presence of Christ spreads “the fragrance of His knowledge in every place” (2 Cor. 2:14, *NKJV*).

Paul rejoices in Christ because the painful letter bore the fruit he intended to harvest (2 Cor. 7:5–9). This is a great victory. Meanwhile, in 2 Corinthians 2:17, Paul reaffirms his sincerity as an apostle of Christ (2 Cor. 2:17, 2 Cor. 1:12). According to this passage, what distinguishes a faithful servant of Christ from a false minister is that while the latter peddles the gospel for self-interest, the former preaches the Word of God in wholehearted love for Christ.

What motivates you in all that you do, especially when you do it in the name of Jesus?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Message Heeded,” pp. 323–334, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“Those who have borne the greatest sorrows are frequently the ones who carry the greatest comfort to others, bringing sunshine wherever they go. Such ones have been chastened and sweetened by their afflictions; they did not lose confidence in God when trouble assailed them, but clung closer to His protecting love. Such ones are living proof of the tender care of God.”—Ellen G. White, *God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 122.

“A consecrated Christian life is ever shedding light and comfort and peace. It is characterized by purity, tact, simplicity, and usefulness. It is controlled by that unselfish love that sanctifies the influence. It is full of Christ, and leaves a track of light wherever its possessor may go.”—*God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 122.

“The apostle Paul found it necessary to reprove wrong in the church, but he did not lose his self-control in reproving error. He anxiously explains the reason of his action. How carefully he wrought so as to leave the impression that he was a friend of the erring! He made them understand that it cost him pain to give them pain. He left the impression upon their minds that his interest was identified with theirs.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1094.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In 2 Corinthians 2:1–14, Paul affirms his integrity in ministry. Why is this ministerial quality so crucial?
- 2 What does the fact that Paul changed his traveling plan tell us about the necessity of flexibility in Christian ministry? Why is it important to be open to change when needed?
- 3 Paul faced anguish and anxiety in his ministry. This clearly shows that church leaders are human beings who are as exposed to distress as any other people. What can church members do in order to ease their work?
- 4 Paul refers to his restlessness (2 Cor. 2:13) right before mentioning his triumph in Christ (2 Cor. 2:14). How could he talk about his weakness and strength at the same time? How can we?

Mission Begins Young

By KATHIE LICHTENWALTER

“Even though as a boy I’d read all of Eric B. Hare’s* stories, I don’t think it ever occurred to me that I could be a missionary myself,” says Myron Iseminger, a missionary serving in Lebanon.

In the late 1970s, Myron’s sister declared she was taking a year off to volunteer as an English teacher in Japan. After a year in college as a theology major, Myron proposed his own volunteer experience to the Middle East. It was a decision that would steer the rest of his life.

“I thought it would be really neat to experience the Bible lands,” Myron says. “Besides, I thought it would give me some helpful ministerial experience. But I received much more. That year, my worldview began changing. I saw another culture, another way of thinking. I went to my students’ homes and listened to their stories, saw their personal grief. I began understanding life from another person’s perspective. I realized it’s easy to judge groups of people until you meet them one-on-one and come to love them.” Myron began sensing the call to long-term service for God overseas.

At the time, cross-cultural pastors didn’t appear to be in high demand, but Myron concluded if the world church budgeted funds for mission, finance officers would be needed to manage those funds. When he returned to college, he added a second major in business. It was another critical turn that would determine the direction of his life.

The advice a church leader shared with Myron also weighed on his mind: if you want to serve in a foreign country, make sure the woman you marry shares that same vision! Myron’s wife, Candace, had never been outside the United States when they married. “But she was willing,” Myron says. Together, they waited for a job opportunity overseas.

One day, a General Conference officer told Myron there was an opening in the Middle East for a treasurer. Soon, Myron and Candace were settling into an apartment in the Egypt Field office. It was hard work but rewarding. “I enjoyed being on the frontline of mission,” Myron says. “I liked contributing where there were limited resources. I enjoyed seeing the difference I could make, even though it was challenging.”

Myron would later serve in a variety of church offices.

It all seemed impossible to a little boy captivated by Eric B. Hare’s stories, but he can testify, “If we’re open to wherever God needs us, He works out our life direction much better than we could ever plan it.”

* Eric B. Hare was a Seventh-day Adventist missionary and prolific author.

Your generous and systematic mission offerings help support the ministry of missionaries. Please give during Sabbath School.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *2 Corinthians 2:4*

Study Focus: *2 Cor. 1:3–14, 2 Cor. 2:1–17.*

Introduction

In a small village, a woman named Anna ran a bakery. Every morning, her baking filled the air with the aroma of freshly baked goods and warm spices. The scent drifted through the streets, drawing people in. Some eagerly came to buy, while others simply enjoyed the comforting smells as they passed by.

However, not everyone appreciated it. A neighbor, Mr. Grayson, found the smell overwhelming and constantly complained. “This scent is everywhere! I can’t escape it!” he grumbled.

One day, during a harsh winter storm, the power went out in the village. Many were cold and hungry, but Anna’s bakery had a wood-fired oven. She opened her doors, offering warmth and food to anyone in need. People followed the familiar fragrance, knowing it led to a place of comfort and nourishment.

Even Mr. Grayson, who once complained, found himself drawn in. As he accepted a warm loaf of bread, he realized the same fragrance he once despised was now sustaining him.

Christianity is more than fundamental beliefs or theological reflection. It involves people, communities, and a God who is with us in our darkest moments or on our loftiest mountaintops of success. In the second epistle to the Corinthians, we can learn a lot about Paul’s life and ministry through his interaction with the church. We realize, once again, that more than our words, our attitudes and relationships communicate the fragrance of Christ and attract a world yearning for hope.

Lesson Themes

This week’s lesson highlights a number of important themes, including the following:

- 1. God’s Comfort in Suffering.** God comforts us in moments of suffering and enables us to comfort others (*2 Cor. 1:3–7*).
- 2. Relying on God, Not Ourselves.** Suffering teaches us dependence on God (*2 Cor. 1:8–11*).
- 3. Integrity and Faithfulness in Ministry.** Christian ministry must be sincere and reflect God’s faithfulness (*2 Cor. 1:12–14, 17–22*).
- 4. Forgiveness and Restoration.** Love-driven ministry seeks reconciliation, not condemnation (*2 Cor. 2:5–11*).

5. The Fragrance of Christ. Our lives should spread the message of Christ, much as a good-smelling fragrance, even if some reject it (*2 Cor. 2:14–17*).

Part II: Commentary

1. Historical Background of 2 Corinthians: The Pauline authorship of the second letter to the Corinthians has not been seriously questioned and has been recognized as such by early church fathers, including Polycarp (ca. A.D. 155), Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 185), Clement of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 200), and Tertullian (ca. A.D. 210). But, as noted by some, 2 Corinthians “is surely the Pauline letter with the most complicated set of historical, social, and communal elements behind it.”—Philip Towner, “Corinthians, Second Letter To,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. K. Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), vol. 1, p. 744.

One of the reasons for these complications is the less-than-smooth transitions between topics and abrupt shifts in tone. The letter possibly was written over an extended period of time, as Paul traveled through Macedonia (*2 Cor. 2:1–12*), encountering changing conditions and perhaps even acquiring additional news from the church. These conditions and information may have resulted in additional topics that appear disconnected from the others already mentioned.

2. A Love-driven Ministry: In 2 Corinthians 1 and 2, Paul highlights several key characteristics of a love-driven ministry. His personal experiences, including suffering, forgiveness, and sincerity, demonstrate how true Christian ministry should be motivated by God’s love rather than by personal gain or status. The following subcategories can be found in the biblical text and could be discussed within your group Sabbath School setting:

(a) *Compassion and Comfort (2 Cor. 1:3–7):* Paul describes God as the “Father of mercies” and the “God of all comfort” (*2 Cor. 1:3, ESV*). Compassion (or mercies) and comfort are exactly what Paul received from God in his own trials. Thus, the apostle was able to extend this same mercy to the people around him, including his churches. A compassion-driven ministry provides comfort to others, just as God comforts us in our suffering (*2 Cor. 1:4*). Ministry isn’t about power or control but about sharing in people’s pain and pointing them to Christ. Paul reminds the Corinthians that his own sufferings allowed him better to understand and minister to others who suffer (*2 Cor. 1:6*).

(b) *Dependence on God, Not Self (2 Cor. 1:8–11):* In this second part

of the prologue (or greeting section), Paul recalls a time he was under extreme pressure, beyond his strength, even despairing of life (*2 Cor. 1:8*). Instead of relying on himself, he trusted in God, who has the ability to raise the dead (*2 Cor. 1:9*). The resurrection imagery is used here to show that God is able to do (and did do) the impossible when we rely on Him. A love-driven ministry depends on God's power, not on human ability. Paul invites his audience (and us as well) not to act as if they have all the answers but, rather, to point people to trust in God, who delivers His children from trials (*2 Cor. 1:10*).

(c) *Integrity and Sincerity (2 Cor. 1:12–14)*: Paul insists that his ministry was conducted with holiness, sincerity, and transparency, not by worldly wisdom but by God's grace (*2 Cor. 1:12*). Paul defends himself against accusations of not being reliable and of being inconsistent, assuring the Corinthians that he was not being deceptive when he changed his travel plans (*2 Cor. 1:15–18*). This integrity and sincerity are based on God's faithfulness and become obvious in Paul's Christ-centered preaching, as referenced in 2 Corinthians 1:20: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him [i.e., Christ]. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory" (*ESV*). A love-driven ministry does not manipulate or deceive, but acts with honesty and integrity.

(d) *Faithfulness to God's Promises (2 Cor. 1:18–22)*: Paul emphasizes that God's promises are always "Yes" in Christ (*2 Cor. 1:20*). A love-driven ministry focuses on God's faithfulness, not on human inconsistencies. The work of the Holy Spirit describes three main activities. It first "establishes" the believer (*2 Cor. 1:21*). The verb used here is in the present tense, which suggests an ongoing effect. Second, the believer has been "anointed" to be able to share the good news with the world, as a priest or Levite would have done in the Old Testament. Finally, the Spirit seals believers in their hearts as God's own (*2 Cor. 1:22*), assuring them of His commitment. Paul describes this seal as a "guarantee" (or down payment, Greek *arrabōn*) (*2 Cor. 1:22*), so that the believer can be assured of God's trustworthiness and His unchanging promises.

(e) *Forgiveness and Reconciliation (2 Cor. 2:5–11)*: Paul urges the Corinthians to forgive and restore a repentant church member who had caused pain (*2 Cor. 2:6, 7*). A church motivated by love seeks reconciliation, not punishment or revenge. Paul then continues by stating that an unforgiving spirit gives Satan a foothold in the church (*2 Cor. 2:11*). Instead of holding grudges, a love-driven ministry seeks to restore broken relationships with grace and mercy.

3. A Fragrance of Christ (2 Cor. 2:14–17): Smells communicate non-verbally. For example, bad smells drive us away. Conversely, good smells

are attractive and can tap deep into our emotions. The smell of a favorite food may evoke within us long-forgotten emotions, reminding us of home, family, or celebrations. Smells were important in the cultural context of the biblical world, as they often functioned as the extension of the personality of the bearer. Priest and kings (as well as the sanctuary) were anointed in the Old Testament, and the composition of the anointing oil suggests a strong-smelling fragrance (*compare with Exod. 30:22–33*), containing cinnamon, myrrh, cane, and cassia. Also commonplace was the rite of anointing specific people or locations as belonging to God, whose fragrance they now bore.

Paul uses the fragrance metaphor in connection with a triumphal procession (linking it in the minds of his audience to well-known Roman triumphal processions). During these triumphs, evidence of the victory was shown. For Paul, the Corinthian church—with all its frailties and internal challenges—was the evidence of the success of his proclamation in the face of trials (*2 Cor. 2:14*). Additionally for Paul, believers were “an incense offering whose fragrance, being diffused in every place, is the saving knowledge of Christ.”—“2 Corinthians,” in *Andrews Bible Commentary*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez et al. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), p. 1665. Ministry should attract people to Christ, just as a sweet fragrance fills a room. However, to some, the gospel is an offense, like the smell of death (*2 Cor. 2:16*).

Part III: Life Application

Ministry driven by love can reach those who are yearning for hope. This type of ministry requires compassion, integrity, sincerity, and faithfulness to God’s promises. Ultimately, those who have encountered Jesus and been transformed by Him will be like a fragrance that attracts others looking for salvation. The initial chapters of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians introduce this type of ministry, as Paul makes the case for his own ministry. Based on 2 Corinthians 1 and 2, discuss the following questions in your Sabbath School group:

- 1. Why are compassion and grace essential for a love-driven ministry? What role models can we find in Scripture that illustrate these characteristics?**

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2. Many of us don't like to be dependent on others. Why is it important to learn dependence on one another in our churches?

3. Paul repeatedly highlights transparency and integrity in his dealings with churches and individuals. Why is integrity so important in our relationships?

4. What is the importance of God's promises in your life? How would you explain to a nonchurched friend that His promises are trustworthy?

5. Mahatma Gandhi is said to have stated, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." Why is forgiveness essential in our relationships, inside and outside the church?

Authentic Christian Ministry



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: 2 Cor. 3:1–9, 2 Cor. 4:7–18, 2 Cor. 5:11–15, Col. 1:19–23, Eph. 2:13–16, 2 Cor. 6:11–7:1, 2 Corinthians 7.

Memory Text: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2 Corinthians 4:8–10, *ESV*).

Last week, we saw that Paul, by affirming his simplicity and sincerity, defended himself from the accusations of inconstancy and lack of love toward the Corinthians. He always worked for the best interests of his spiritual children. He began a line of thought in 2 Corinthians 2:12–17 that goes to 2 Corinthians 7. While doing so, he reflects on what an authentic ministry for Christ looks like. We can draw so many lessons from Paul's thoughts in that regard.

This week, we will look into 2 Corinthians 3–7, where Paul speaks of his ministry of gaining souls for Christ. Ellen G. White says, “The conversion of sinners and their sanctification through the truth is the strongest proof a minister can have that God has called him to the ministry. The evidence of his apostleship is written upon the hearts of those converted, and is witnessed to by their renewed lives. Christ is formed within, the hope of glory. A minister is greatly strengthened by these seals of his ministry.”—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 328.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 5.

Fruits of an Authentic Ministry

Read 2 Corinthians 3:1–9. In what sense can we be an epistle of Christ?

Letters of recommendation were common in the Greco-Roman world. However, Paul did not bear such letters. The Spirit's transformative power in the lives of the Corinthians was proof of his authentic ministry. Yet, Paul was sure that it was not through his intelligence or efforts that the church in Corinth came into being (2 Cor. 3:4–6). He was not involved in self-promotion (2 Cor. 3:5, 1 Cor. 2:2).

Paul speaks about his ministry by briefly discussing the two covenants: the old one represented by Moses and the new one represented by Paul and his colleagues. A hasty reader may think that the old covenant gave no hope of salvation, but this is untrue. Salvation was available in the old as in the new covenant. The old covenant was the gospel in advance. "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed' " (Gal. 3:8, NKJV).

In 2 Corinthians 3:1–4:6, we can see that the old covenant is used to symbolize the legalistic experience of those who depended upon their own works of obedience as the means of pleasing God. The new covenant, however, represents the experience of those who rely completely on God's grace to do all that God has promised to do for them and in them.

Paul is talking about two different responses, by believers and unbelievers, to the gospel. He is not talking about different gospels, one in the Old Testament and a different one in the New—for there is only one gospel, offered by God, "who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began" (2 Tim. 1:9, NKJV).

"This is not to deny that 2 Corinthians 2:14–4:6 contains some historical elements."—Skip MacCarty, *In Granite or Ingrained?: What the Old and New Covenants Reveal about the Gospel, the Law, and the Sabbath* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2007), p. 120. But Paul is using that history to make the point that some among them "are being saved" and some "are perishing" (2 Cor. 2:15, NKJV). Because of the reaction, that of unbelief and lack of faith toward Moses' ministry, his ministry can be viewed as a ministry of condemnation and death. Because the church at Corinth believed, Paul's ministry among them proved to be a ministry of righteousness, a ministry of the Spirit who gives life.

This experience of salvation of the church in Corinth is the evidence of Paul's authentic ministry.

Suffering and Glory

Read 2 Corinthians 4:7–18. Make a list of Paul’s sufferings. How did he endure his sufferings?

John Huss, the great reformer of the old Bohemia, once said about Jesus, “He is Master of the world, and we are contemptible mortals—yet He suffered! Why, then, should we not suffer also, particularly when suffering is for us a purification?”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 105.

The apostle Paul manifested centuries earlier the same willingness to suffer for Christ. He knew that he was nothing more than a fragile pot made of clay (*2 Cor. 4:7*). He constantly felt hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down, and yet he was not crushed, in despair, forsaken, or destroyed (*2 Cor. 4:8, 9*). He was willing to carry “in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus” would be manifested in him (*2 Cor. 4:10, 11, ESV*).

By “death of Jesus,” Paul probably meant the sufferings that he mentioned in the previous verses. In turn, in an immediate sense, the phrase “life of Jesus” likely refers to the deliverances from death or the spiritual power for the present life. But, ultimately, this is a reference to the resurrection (*2 Cor. 4:12*).

Interestingly, the phrase “death and life” occurs three times in 2 Corinthians 4:10–12. This is a reminder that, in the present age, life is mingled with death. However, in the future glory, we will experience life in the absence of death (*Rev. 20:14, Rev. 21:4*).

Most important, 2 Corinthians 4:7–18 shows that the gospel is preached through fragile human beings so that the glory goes to God alone (*2 Cor. 4:15*). Not infrequently, missionaries suffer in the course of their missionary work. However, our affliction here is light and momentary when compared to that eternal weight of glory waiting for us (*2 Cor. 4:17*). The believer lives by faith, not by sight (*2 Cor. 4:18, 2 Cor. 5:7*).

This hope in the future life captured the mind of Paul so much that he keeps talking about it in the flow of the passage (*2 Cor. 5:1–10*). He refers to his mortal body by the metaphor of an earthly house. Conversely, the “building from God” is a metaphor for the resurrected body (*2 Cor. 5:1*), the great hope for believers of all ages.

Why is it so important that, amid whatever we are going through now, we always keep the hope of the resurrection, our resurrection (1 Cor. 15:52), before us?

Christ-focused Ministry of Reconciliation

Read 2 Corinthians 5:11–15. How does this passage demonstrate that Paul’s ministry is Christ-centered?

Paul knew he was supposed to render an account of his ministry to Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). He knew “the fear of the LORD” and sought to persuade people about the gospel of Christ (2 Cor. 5:11, *ESV*). This fear is reverence and awe toward Christ and, hence, it is combined with Paul’s love for Christ and trust in Christ’s love for him. In the Old Testament, to fear the Lord means to walk in His ways, to love Him, and to serve Him with all your heart and soul (*Deut. 10:12*).

Paul’s ministry is not self-focused but Christ-focused. He did not commend himself. The reason for his boasting is Christ (2 Cor. 12:9). He said, “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Gal. 6:14, ESV*). Thus, the Corinthians’ opportunity to boast about him (2 Cor. 5:12) means to be proud of his Christ-focused ministry in contrast to the self-focused ministry of his opponents.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16–21, Colossians 1:19–23, and Ephesians 2:13–16. What did Paul mean by “ministry of reconciliation”?

Christ is the minister of reconciliation *par excellence*. As such, He “has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18, *NKJV*). The idea of reconciliation occurs over and over throughout 2 Corinthians 5:16–21. This is an essential concept for Paul, and so it must be for us, too.

God has reconciled humanity to Himself by means of the atoning death of His Son. Those who were reconciled to God are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). Now, they are supposed to pass this “message of reconciliation” onward by proclaiming the gospel of Christ (2 Cor. 5:19, *ESV*). In this sense, “we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us” (2 Cor. 5:20, *NKJV*).

Think about what Christ has done for you. Think about the guilt, the sin, the condemnation that would be yours but for what He did for you at the cross. How should this reality impact how you relate to others, especially those who don’t know the Lord?

Call to Holiness

In 2 Corinthians 6:3–10, Paul keeps encouraging the Corinthians to be reconciled to God. He presents a long list of hardships and triumphs to show what it means to be a follower of Christ and a minister of God. In short, he lists difficult situations (2 Cor. 6:4, 5), virtues of character (2 Cor. 6:6), equipment for ministry (2 Cor. 6:7), and vicissitudes of ministry (2 Cor. 6:8–10). After instructing the members in Corinth to be reconciled to God, Paul appeals for them to live a holy life, and to do so by separating themselves from the harmful influence of unbelievers and from unclean things (2 Cor. 6:14–17).

Read 2 Corinthians 6:11–7:1. According to this passage, what does a holy life look like?

Paul emphasizes in this passage the importance of affection and love within the church (1 Cor. 6:11–13). The evidence that people have been reconciled to God is that they seek reconciliation with one another. Indeed, they become, as it were, agents of horizontal reconciliation.

Next, the call to holiness is given by means of six appeals, namely, (1) “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Cor. 6:14, NKJV); (2) “Come out from among them” (2 Cor. 6:17, NKJV); (3) “Be separate” (2 Cor. 6:17, NKJV); (4) “Do not touch what is unclean” (2 Cor. 6:17, NKJV); (5) “Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit” (2 Cor. 7:1, ESV); (6) “Make holiness perfect in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1, RSV; emphasis supplied). These exhortations show that a holy God requires a holy life and separation from idolatry.

On the other hand, the passage also brings seven promises that highlight the role of the Christian church as a holy temple: (1) “I will dwell in them”; (2) “[I will] walk among them”; (3) “I will be their God”; (4) “They shall be My people”; (5) “I will receive you”; (6) “I will be a Father to you”; (7) “You shall be My sons and daughters” (2 Cor. 6:16, 17, 18, NKJV).

Notice that the four promises in 2 Corinthians 6:16 are the basis for the three imperatives in 2 Corinthians 6:17 (see the word “therefore” at the beginning of 2 Corinthians 6:17). This demonstrates that holiness is not the result of one’s efforts but the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. Although holiness results from God, believers must do their part and reject idolatry and every impure practice.

What do God’s promises in 2 Corinthians 6:16–18 tell us about what holiness is?

Comfort and Joy

Read 2 Corinthians 7. What are Paul's feelings upon hearing that the Corinthians had repented?

How much love flows from the words “You are in our hearts” (2 Cor. 7:3, *NKJV*; see also 2 Cor. 6:11). In his deep desire to have his love reciprocated, Paul also says, “Make room in your hearts for us” (2 Cor. 7:2, *ESV*). While the phrase “in your hearts” is not in the Greek text, most English versions supply it, which is correct because the context supports it.

Indeed, the Corinthians opened their hearts to Paul and his fellow workers. This is why verse 4 is a burst of joy. Paul's words express how positive his feelings are at this moment: “Great is my boldness of speech toward you, great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort. I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation” (2 Cor. 7:4, *NKJV*). Paul is filled with comfort and joy. How much comfort and joy our churches can bring to the hearts of their ministers by faithfully committing themselves to Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 7:5–16, Paul further explains the reason for his comfort and joy. These two concepts dominate the passage. The verb *parakaleō* (“to comfort”) or the noun *paraklesis* (“comfort”) occurs together a total of seven times in 2 Corinthians 7. This section of the letter ends the same way it began, namely, with much comfort in God (2 Cor. 1:3–7). Paul's comfort in 2 Corinthians 7 comes from the relief he experienced because the severe letter produced the effect he intended for it.

Although this relief is the result of Titus's positive report, ultimately, God is the agent of the comfort Paul experienced (2 Cor. 7:6). God is indeed the “God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation” (2 Cor. 1:3, 4, *NKJV*).

Interestingly, while Paul is “filled with comfort,” he is “exceedingly joyful” (2 Cor. 7:4, 7, 13). Although his painful letter had caused much sadness, that was a sadness according to God's will with repentance intended (2 Cor. 7:9–11, *NASB*). The Corinthians “sorrowed in a godly manner” (2 Cor. 7:11, *NKJV*), a sorrow producing “repentance leading to salvation” (2 Cor. 7:10, *NKJV*). What else could bring more joy to the heart of an authentic minister of God?

Have you ever experienced godly sorrow in your life? How did you know that it was sorrow according to God's will to lead you to repentance?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Message Heeded,” pp. 323–334, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

Last week, we read the above cited passage in *The Acts of the Apostles*. It is worth rereading it. This time, dwell a little bit more on the parts referring to Paul’s severe letter, his feelings upon writing it, and his joy upon receiving the good news about the sincere repentance of the addressees. Then, reflect on what this tells us about the authenticity of Paul’s ministry and what lessons we can apply to our work for Christ.

“We are to reveal to the universe, to the world fallen and to worlds unfallen, that there is forgiveness with God, that through the love of God we may be reconciled to God. Man repents, becomes contrite in heart, believes in Christ as his atoning sacrifice, and realizes that God is reconciled to him.”—Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies On Education*, p. 223.

“As a church, we have received great light. This light the Lord has entrusted to us for the benefit and blessing of the world. To us has been given the ministry of reconciliation. With power from on high we are to beseech men to be reconciled to God.”—White, Letter 32, 1903.

Once reconciled to God, people must seek holiness. Commenting on 2 Corinthians 7:1, Ellen G. White hints at what Paul meant by “perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1, NKJV). She says Paul sought to help the new converts “to become self-reliant, growing Christians, strong in faith, ardent in zeal, and wholehearted in their consecration to God and to the work of advancing His kingdom.”—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 201.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Paul refers to us as “jars of clay” containing the gospel treasure (2 Cor. 4:7, ESV). How can the fact that the human condition is weak, frail, and filled with limitations enhance rather than undermine the proclamation of the gospel?
- 2 What does it mean to be a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17, NKJV)? How does this affect our daily lives? How has Christ made you a new creature?
- 3 In 2 Corinthians 6:4, 5, Paul provides a long list of hardships for the gospel’s sake. How did he respond to his sufferings (see 2 Cor. 6:6, 7)? How does this help you respond to yours?
- 4 Paul contrasts godly sorrow with worldly sorrow (2 Cor. 7:10). In what manner may sorrow relate to repentance? How would you describe godly sorrow in contrast to worldly sorrow?

Jake's Prayer Journey

The name of the church planter has been changed, and the region where he works has been withheld to protect his ministry.

Jake, a church planter, knew there was one thing he couldn't miss in his daily life now that he and his wife were living in a country where Christians were scarce: prayer. He decided to write down all his prayer requests each month and to see how God answered them.

Jake and a group of members at his church plant were each responsible for discipling one or two new attendees. The group gathered each day of the week to pray for these new believers and reserved one day for fasting.

During one house church meeting, a member introduced Jake to Omar, a cook who had discovered Jesus many years ago. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Jake started a conversation with Omar, and soon, the two men promised to meet.

A few days later, Omar visited Jake and shared his testimony of discovering Jesus through the Bible. For the past 15 years, he had followed his faith cautiously, avoiding too much contact with other believers to avoid risking his life. His family and friends didn't know about his beliefs. Jake listened intently as Omar expressed his desire to be baptized.

From that moment on, Jake and Omar met almost daily to study the Bible.

During that same month, Jake met Wassim, a young man who had lived as a refugee in a Western country for some years. Having left his homeland disillusioned, he had wrestled with questions that led him further away from his past beliefs. Wassim began exploring Christianity alone, finding a sense of peace he had never known. Upon returning to his country, he searched online for other local believers and was introduced to Jake's house church.

To Jake's delight, he learned that Wassim also desired baptism. Jake met weekly with Wassim, delving into subjects such as faith, Jesus Christ, and eternity.

As Jake completed the first month of his prayer journey, he was overcome with a profound admiration for God's responses. He had asked the Lord to help him give Bible studies, and now he had two eager students.

As Jake prepares to step into the second month of his prayer journey, his heart is filled with amazement and anticipation. He knows that his journey has only begun, and he feels the strength of God leading him forward.

To learn about the church-planting ministry of Global Mission pioneers, visit bit.ly/GMPioneers.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *2 Corinthians 4:8–10*

Study Focus: *2 Corinthians 3–7.*

Introduction

A young pastor, fresh out of seminary, arrived at his first church appointment with a thick folder in his hand. Inside were glowing letters of recommendation—from professors, previous pastors, and mentors. He handed them proudly to the church board, believing they were the key to earning trust and proving his worth. Unfortunately, after a few months, things didn't go as planned. His sermons felt flat. The congregation was distant. He worked hard, but something was missing.

One day, an older member invited him to her home. She listened kindly to his frustrations, and then said something he would never forget: “We don't need a letter telling us how good you are. We need to see Christ in you. Show us your heart. Let us see how God has changed you—and then let God change us through you.” It was a turning point. He stopped trying to impress and started to open his heart. He visited homes. He prayed with people. Cried with them. Shared his own struggles. And over time, lives began to change—not because of his credentials but because the Spirit was working through an authentic heart.

In 2 Corinthians 3–7, the apostle Paul focuses his message on genuine ministry. He reminds the Corinthians that authentic ministry isn't about outward letters of recommendation or spiritual performance. Rather, it's about hearts changed by the Spirit, ministers who are open and vulnerable, and a life that reflects the glory of God. Paul invites us into a deeper vision of ministry, one that's Spirit-led, emotionally honest, and powerfully transformative.

Lesson Themes

This week's lesson highlights four important themes:

1. **Spiritual Transformation.** Ministry leads to changed lives through the Spirit.
2. **Emotional Honesty.** True ministry includes vulnerability and open-heartedness.
3. **Moral Integrity.** Ministers are called to holiness and separation from worldly compromise.
4. **Relational Reconciliation.** Ministry seeks restored relationships through truth and grace.

Part II: Commentary

1. Background: Letters of Recommendation in the Greco-Roman World: As a wealthy, cosmopolitan city in the Roman Empire with an ethnically and socially diverse population, Corinth reflected the values of Mediterranean societies of the period, emphasizing honor, shame, status, and public recognition. Wealthy patrons supported clients and gained influence, often expecting public praise and loyalty in return. Skilled orators were idolized. People were drawn to speakers who were eloquent, entertaining, and self-promoting. Many so-called “super-apostles” fit this mold.

Paul deliberately avoided worldly eloquence or manipulation (*see 1 Cor. 2:1–5*). He ministered in weakness and humility, emphasizing the power of the Spirit, not human wisdom. Paul’s humble ministry, filled with sacrifice and suffering, clashed with Corinthian values of power, charisma, and status.

In such a climate, letters of recommendation were important. “Such letters were well known in the Greco-Roman world and functioned against the backdrop of Mediterranean concepts of honor and shame. Travelers often carried letters of recommendation that their friends had written for them in order to request a kindness or favor, such as hospitality, help, or employment. The letter writer commended the traveler and essentially asked the recipient to trust his or her judgment about the bearer’s character. Recipients of letters of recommendation understood their obligation to treat the letter-bearer in the same way they would treat the writer. Such letters usually included features common to other Graeco-Roman letters, such as an opening, closing, and salutations.”—Derek R. Brown and Wendy Widder with E. Tod Twist, “2 Corinthians,” in *Lexham Research Commentary*, ed. John D. Barry (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013), notes on 2 Cor. 3:1–3, Logos digital edition.

Paul states that he did not come with any such letters (*2 Cor. 3:1*), but that his letter of recommendation could be “read” in the existence of the Corinthian church itself: “You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all” (*2 Cor. 3:2, ESV*). Ministry in Corinth meant ministering against the grain—specifically, against a culture obsessed with power, status, and self-promotion. Paul modeled a Spirit-dependent, sacrificial, and authentic ministry that looked weak by worldly standards but pointed to the glory of Christ.

2. Spiritual Transformation: Authentic Christian ministry is rooted in the Spirit, not in human credentials, and leads to lives changed by the Spirit. Second Corinthians 3:1–9 is central to Paul’s vision of authentic Christian leadership and gospel ministry. Paul is defending his ministry against critics in Corinth who were impressed by outward credentials—letters of recommendation, eloquent speech, and spiritual showmanship. Paul responds, not with boasting but by redefining ministry itself: it is not a human performance but a divine work, carried out through the Holy Spirit.

Paul begins by pointing out that the real evidence of his ministry isn't a résumé—it's the Corinthian believers themselves (*2 Cor. 3:1–3*). The real evidence is not about credentials but changed people. The Spirit writes on hearts, not on paper. Paul illustrates this idea with a reference to the Ten Commandments, which were written on stone. He contrasts this imagery with the working of the Spirit through whom God internalizes the covenant by writing it on our hearts—a fulfillment of the new covenant promise found in the Old Testament (*compare with Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26, 27*).

Paul claims no self-sufficiency; he's not a self-made apostle. Ministry is “not of the letter but of the Spirit” (*2 Cor. 3:6, ESV*). The law alone kills (through exposing sin); the Spirit gives life (through regeneration and grace). The competence for ministry is something God imparts, not something we earn or inherit.

In 2 Corinthians 3:7–9, Paul contrasts two ministries: the ministry of death versus the ministry of the Spirit.

Old Covenant (Law)	New Covenant (Spirit)
Written on stone	Written on hearts
Brings condemnation	Brings righteousness
Glory that fades	Glory that increases
Leads to death	Gives life

Paul is not downplaying the law or calling it bad. Indeed, the law isn't bad (how could it when it is given by God!); rather, it reveals sin and condemns evil. The Spirit, through Christ, transforms and justifies. The glory of the Spirit's ministry surpasses even the glory of Moses' face on Sinai. All ministry must be Christ-centered to draw people into the life, righteousness, and glory of Christ (*expanded further in 2 Corinthians 3:18*). Strategy without the Spirit is just noise.

3. Emotional Honesty: Second Corinthians 6:11–13 and 2 Corinthians 7:2–4 reveal one of the most emotionally rich and pastorally vulnerable moments in Paul's letters. Paul begins this section with a personal, almost intimate, appeal: “Our heart is wide open” (*2 Cor. 6:11, ESV*). Paul isn't guarded or manipulative—he communicates with sincerity, clarity, and emotional honesty. His “wide-open heart” reflects a deep love, even though the relationship has been strained. In a city such as Corinth, where relationships were often transactional and public image mattered deeply, Paul's raw openness was countercultural. He wasn't putting on a show; he was baring his soul. He longs for reciprocal love, not as a matter of obligation but as a sign of genuine community in Christ.

Paul demonstrates that authentic Christian ministry isn't one-sided. It involves inviting others in, not just instructing them. Authentic Christian ministry also creates space for mutual trust, not just top-down leadership. It risks rejection, knowing love sometimes goes unreturned. Emotional expression wasn't weakness to Paul—it was gospel-shaped love.

4. Moral Integrity: A central thread in Paul’s vision of authentic ministry is moral integrity. Ministers are not just messengers of the gospel—they’re meant to embody it. Their lives are meant to reflect the holiness of the God whom they proclaim. All ministry must be rooted in truth and transparency (*2 Cor. 4:2*). There is no room for manipulation, hidden motives, or watered-down doctrine.

Integrity means living above reproach, both in public and in private. Ministers are to avoid compromise, especially when facing pressure. Holiness isn’t perfection; rather, it is consistency (*2 Cor. 6:3*).

Second Corinthians 6:14 is often applied broadly, but its context speaks directly to the ministerial call of separation—not isolation, but a life set apart, markedly distinct from the patterns and values of the world. Paul is not advocating a judgmental posture but calling for a radical allegiance to God over worldly systems. Paul points out that the message cannot be separated from the messenger. Moral integrity is not optional—it is essential for credibility, power, and fruitfulness in ministry.

5. Relational Reconciliation: One of the most beautiful and often overlooked aspects of authentic ministry is the commitment to relational reconciliation. Ministry is not just about proclaiming truth; it’s about restoring broken relationships, both between God and humanity and among people themselves.

Paul’s heart in 2 Corinthians is deeply relational. At the core of his message is the ministry of reconciliation (*2 Cor. 5:18*). The gospel isn’t just a message of forgiveness; it’s a restoration of the relationship between sinful humanity and a holy God. Every believer is entrusted with that same mission. Ministry that embodies reconciliation will always lead people back to the heart of God (*2 Cor. 5:20*).

Paul pleads with the Corinthians to respond now—not just to the gospel but to the grace of reconciliation (*2 Cor. 6:2*). There is a divine urgency here. Restoration is not something to postpone. Every delay prolongs the damage. Reconciliation is not just emotional; it’s missional. A reconciled people reflect the reconciling heart of God.

Part III: Life Application

As you consider 2 Corinthians 3–7, discuss the following questions with your group:

- 1. In what areas of your life do you feel weak or broken, and how might God be using those places to display His strength?**

2. Do you tend to hide your struggles in ministry, or do you use them to testify of God's grace? Explain.

3. What does integrity look like in a culture that often values image over authenticity?

4. How can we guard against compromising with worldly values in our daily lives and in leadership?

5. What does Paul's example teach us about handling broken relationships in ministry?

6. Why is reconciliation so central to the gospel? How should that affect our approach to conflict?

7. How can truth and grace work together in healing relationships?

Stewardship *and* Mission



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: 2 Corinthians 8–9; John 3:16; John 17:5; Luke 9:58; Rev. 13:8; Rom. 12:8; Rom. 15:26, 27.

Memory Text: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9, NKJV).

Second Corinthians 8 and 9 show that Paul gave the Corinthians the opportunity to serve their brothers and sisters in Judea. This passage shows that giving is a privilege that God grants us, so that we can emulate the self-giving character of Christ. The language of heaven is one of giving. Notice these remarkable words: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16, NKJV; *emphasis supplied*).

Furthermore, John 3:16 clearly expresses God's purpose in giving Jesus, so that “whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (NKJV). Stewardship and mission go together in this passage. They are as inseparable as the two sides of a coin. It is no wonder that Paul identifies himself and his fellow workers as “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1, NKJV). We, too, are stewards in the same sense.

This week we will see that the concepts of stewardship and mission are deeply rooted in the example of Jesus. Indeed, stewardship and mission are inseparable. Stewardship provides the church with financial and human resources to fulfill God's mission.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 12.

The Example of Jesus

The context of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 has to do with Paul's encouraging members in Corinth to complete a fundraiser for the impoverished churches in Judea. Apparently, they had already committed to doing that (2 Cor. 8:10, 11; 2 Cor. 9:5; see also 1 Cor. 16:1–4), but relationship issues between them and Paul had complicated things. After dealing with these issues (2 Corinthians 1–7), Paul now turns to the conclusion of that task (2 Corinthians 8–9).

Initially, Paul appeals to the example of the Macedonians (2 Cor. 8:1–7), whose extreme poverty did not prevent them from overflowing “in a wealth of generosity” (2 Cor. 8:2, *ESV*). Yes, poverty and generosity can walk together. However, this admirable generosity of the Macedonians is but a replication of Jesus' generosity in giving Himself for us (2 Cor. 8:8–15).

Read 2 Corinthians 8:9. What does this passage tell us about the example of Jesus?

Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 8:9 is one of the most astonishing, powerful, and profound passages in the whole Bible. Paul tells the story of Jesus' mission but with an incredible economy of words. There is so much theology here. This is the story of redemption but in only one verse.

Even more impressive is that this story is told through financial language. Yes, Jesus was rich. His richness refers to His pre-existence in heaven (*John 17:5*). He decided to become poor by giving up the heavenly glory and coming to this world of sorrows. He became literally poor (*Luke 9:58*). Although He was equal with God, He “emptied Himself by taking the form of a bond-servant and being born in the likeness of men” (*Phil. 2:7, NASB*). “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (*Phil. 2:8, ESV*).

Jesus gave His own life so that we might live forever with Him. His offering had a purpose: our salvation. Stewardship and mission go together. Second Corinthians 8–9 tells the story of a particular money offering, but this story is based upon Jesus. During this week, we will see theological principles related to the practice of offering gifts that are based on Christ's offering of Himself.

Dwell on the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When you realize that all this was done for you so that you can have hope of something beyond this miserable existence here, what should your reaction be?

Motivation

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1, 5 and 2 Corinthians 9:7, 9, 13, 15. What is the central message of these passages?

The language of giving pervades 2 Corinthians 8 and 9: “The grace of God . . . has been given” (2 Cor: 8:1, *ESV*); “They gave themselves” (2 Cor: 8:5, *ESV*); “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart . . . , for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor: 9:7, *NIV*); “He has given to the poor” (2 Cor: 9:9, *ESV*); “They will glorify God because of . . . the generosity of your contribution” (2 Cor: 9:13, *ESV*); “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” (2 Cor: 9:15, *ESV*). Second Corinthians 8 and 9 begin and end with the language of giving (2 Cor: 8:1 and 2 Cor: 9:15). We must read these two chapters with the idea of giving in mind. They present at least four major reasons for giving our offerings.

Gratitude for God’s grace (2 Cor: 8:1; 2 Cor: 9:14, 15). Second Corinthians 8–9 begins with a reference to “the grace of God” (2 Cor: 8:1). A little further, Paul says, “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Cor: 8:9, *ESV*). The grace of God and Christ is presented here as one’s primary reason for the practice of offering. God did so much for us by giving us Christ. By offering our gifts in return, we recognize the grace of God in our lives.

As with the concept of giving, the term “grace” (in Greek, *charis*) also occurs repeatedly in 2 Corinthians 8–9. Likewise, the word *charis* occurs at the beginning and the end of this passage (2 Cor: 8:1; 2 Cor: 9:14, 15). Paul applies this term with different meanings in the passage to emphasize that the grace of Christ in our lives results in grace for others and for thanksgiving.

Desire to follow the example of Jesus (2 Cor: 8:9). Jesus was rich and became poor (remember that these are symbols for His eternal pre-existence and then coming into humanity, respectively). There is only one way for that to have happened: He gave all. As for us, by sharing our offerings, we provide means for others to know Christ.

Desire to share God’s blessings (2 Cor: 9:10, 11). We give to others only because we first received from God. He enriches us so that we can be generous.

Sincere love (2 Cor: 8:8, 24). Giving is the test of sincere and genuine love. It is the most substantial evidence that love dwells in one’s heart. To use an English expression, it is to “put your money where your mouth is.”

How generous are you? In light of the Cross, how much do you give in contrast to what you could give?

Planning

Read 2 Corinthians 9:7. What does this passage say about the act of offering?

God's decision to save the world took place even before the world fell into sin. Christ's coming to die for us was part of an ancient plan (*Rev. 13:8*). God was not caught by surprise. He had made plans to give Himself through Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, planning is an essential theological principle that concerns the act of giving. This can be seen in at least two ways:

First, **planning involves previous decision**. Paul says that "each of you should give what you have decided in your heart" (*2 Cor. 9:7, NIV*). The Greek word translated as "decided" is the verb *proaireō*. This verb is a compound form. The particle *pro* means "beforehand" or "in advance," and *aireō* means in this context "to decide." Thus, *proaireō* points to a decision made beforehand. Also, by starting his statement with "each of you," Paul indicates that the given amount will not be the same for everyone. His point was simply that whatever people decide to give, they should do it with careful reflection. They should give what they believe is the right amount for them to give.

Second, **planning involves the principle of proportionality**. Paul reports that the Macedonians "gave according to their means" (*2 Cor. 8:3, ESV*). Next, he applies this principle of proportionality to the Corinthians, as well. Encouraging them to finish the task that they had already committed to, he urges them to complete that project by using the resources that they possess (*2 Cor. 8:11*). He concludes this thought by saying that the offering is given "according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have" (*2 Cor. 8:12, ESV*). Whereas the Bible defines the proportionality of the tithes, namely, 10 percent, the same does not apply to the offerings. "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart" (*2 Cor. 9:7, NIV*) by applying the principle of proportionality. In other words, each one decides which proportion of earnings that he or she will give as an offering. Each one is supposed to give in proportion to what one has. This cannot be done without planning.

How faithful are you with tithes and offerings, no matter how rich or poor you are? What excuses do you use to hold back from giving when you know that you can do more?

Attitude

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1–5. What possible reason could have been behind the Macedonians’ willingness to give their offerings with such generosity?

The positive attitude of the Macedonians can be seen in several ways.

First, **they gave with abundant joy (2 Cor. 8:2)**. Paul says that the Macedonians’ “abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity” (2 Cor. 8:2, *ESV*). He later mentions that “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7, *NKJV*). The Greek word rendered as “cheerful” occurs only here in the New Testament. A term from the same family occurs elsewhere: “The one who does acts of mercy [must do it] with cheerfulness” (Rom. 12:8, *ESV*). Terms from this word family sometimes appear in extra-biblical literature, with a sense of gladness and happiness. In 2 Corinthians 9:7, being a cheerful giver means giving without reluctance.

Second, **they gave with generosity (2 Cor. 8:2)**. Before Paul mentioned the Macedonians’ generosity, he first referred to their “extreme poverty” (*ESV*). The word “generosity” (in Greek, *haplotētos*) appears twice more in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. Paul says, “You will be enriched in every way so that you can be *generous* on every occasion” (2 Cor. 9:11, *NIV*; *emphasis supplied*), meaning that we are given so that we can then give. A little further, he mentions “the *generosity* of your contribution” (2 Cor. 9:13, *ESV*; *emphasis supplied*). In this passage, being generous in contributing is a way of confessing Christ’s gospel.

Third, **they gave “of their own free will” (2 Cor. 8:3, *NLT*)**. This means that they gave voluntarily. This becomes even more admirable when one sees they did not give out of their surplus, for their resources were extremely limited. Paul uses the same idea to characterize Titus’s willingness to visit the Corinthians. He went to Corinth voluntarily (2 Cor. 8:17).

Fourth, **they gave with a sense that giving is a privilege (2 Cor. 8:4)**. This attitude is perceptible in the Macedonians’ request to participate in the collection. “They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service” (2 Cor. 8:4, *NIV*).

Finally, **they participated in the collection as an act of total consecration (2 Cor. 8:5)**. Paul says, “They gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us” (2 Cor. 8:5, *ESV*). Giving oneself to the Lord results in giving oneself to others. The Macedonians expanded their mission involvement beyond financial assistance. That is, giving and being generous is not limited to money alone.

Unity

We have seen that Paul encourages the members in Corinth to get involved in a collection for the impoverished churches in Judea. One of his purposes is to kindle a sense of unity. He wants them to participate, to be part of the mission. He wants to show that the Gentile churches are part of the same family of God as are the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. That is, these people, who were once their opponents, are now, indeed, fellow members with them in God's new covenant remnant. Paul wants to see the whole Christian family, Jew and Gentile, united in a powerful way that can bear a witness to the church in generations to come.

Titus and two other acclaimed brothers were in charge of the funds. God put this care for the church into the heart of Titus (*2 Cor. 8:16*). Through the churches, God also chose the two other brothers (*2 Cor. 8:18–23*). They are called “messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ” (*2 Cor. 8:23, NKJV*). Whether “the glory of Christ” describes these two faithful brothers or the churches themselves does not matter. Giving offerings is ultimately a signal of loyalty to Christ, the Head of the church (*Eph. 4:15*).

Second Corinthians 8–9 indicates that the offerings should be given to people appointed by God through the church. The phrases “all the churches” (*2 Cor. 8:18, NKJV*), “chosen by the churches” (*2 Cor. 8:19, NKJV*), and “messengers of the churches” (*2 Cor. 8:23, NKJV*) suggest precisely that. Thus, the following exhortation is not surprising, “Give proof before the churches of your love” (*2 Cor. 8:24, ESV*).

Bringing offerings to the church—God's appointed instrument on earth—promotes unity and, at the same time, is the result of a sense of unity (*2 Cor. 8:13, 14*). Money can be a great unifier. On the other hand, if people's eyes are not single to the glory of God, money can create division, as well.

How does Romans 15:26, 27 reveal Paul's desire for unity here?

Finally, Paul depicts the collection as service or ministry, as an act of grace, as a blessing, as an act of worship, and also as fellowship. All that from an offering? Think about it.

How does our giving to fellow churches and missions overseas, often in faraway places, help bring unity to our world church?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “A Liberal Church,” pp. 335–345, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“Those whose hearts are filled with the love of Christ, will follow the example of Him who for our sake became poor, that through His poverty we might be made rich. Money, time, influence—all the gifts they have received from God’s hand, they will value only as a means of advancing the work of the gospel. Thus it was in the early church; and when in the church of today it is seen that by the power of the Spirit the members have taken their affections from the things of the world, and that they are willing to make sacrifices in order that their fellow men may hear the gospel, the truths proclaimed will have a powerful influence upon the hearers.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 71.

“The Lord does not need our offerings. We cannot enrich Him by our gifts. Says the psalmist: ‘All things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee.’ Yet God permits us to show our appreciation of His mercies by self-sacrificing efforts to extend the same to others. This is the only way in which it is possible for us to manifest our gratitude and love to God. He has provided no other.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, pp. 18, 19.

“How great was the gift of God to man, and how like our God to make it! With a liberality that can never be exceeded he gave, that he might save the rebellious sons of men and bring them to see his purpose and discern his love. Will you, by your gifts and offerings, show that you think nothing too good for Him who ‘gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life?’”—Ellen G. White, in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 15, 1900.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell more on 2 Corinthians 8:9. Why is the example of Jesus so crucial as far as stewardship is concerned?
- 2 John 3:16 hints that the language of heaven is one of giving. Read John 15:13; Ephesians 5:2, 25; Galatians 2:19, 20; and 1 John 3:16. What do these passages and John 3:16 have in common, and what message can we take from them?
- 3 Based on your reading of 2 Corinthians 8–9, what are the personal benefits of giving?
- 4 In addition to giving systematic offerings, what other things can you do to imitate Jesus’ self-giving example?

BLESS You! Part 1

By OFFICE OF ADVENTIST MISSION

Copenhagen wasn't the kind of place where people went looking for faith. In fact, Rob and Bethany knew that moving to one of the most secular cities in Europe meant facing a different kind of mission field—one where success would be measured by relationships, not numbers.

They arrived in 2024, stepping into a city where polished systems and comfortable lifestyles seemed to leave little room—or need—for God. But Rob and Bethany hadn't come to preach sermons on street corners. They came to build friendships.

Years earlier, the couple had served in a traditional church before going to seminary. There, God began to stir something new in their hearts.

"We realized we wanted to rub shoulders with people outside our Adventist bubble," Rob recalled. "We wanted friends we could introduce to Jesus."

Their first foray into church planting was in Squamish, British Columbia.

It was unfamiliar and stretching—unlike anything they'd done before. But through this experience they learned to befriend people of very different beliefs and worldviews. They discovered they could be confident in representing their faith while connecting with others in meaningful ways.

Four years later, when the opportunity came to plant a church in a cross-cultural setting, they felt ready. Now in Copenhagen, they approach ministry through a relational framework. Rob adapted a simple acronym—**BLESS**—that encompasses their friendship-focused approach.

B stands for *Begin with Prayer*. "You start by pursuing a friendship with Jesus," Rob explained, "and asking Him to guide you toward others."

L means *Listen*. "You don't talk first. You learn. You listen to their lives, their needs, and where God is already working."

E is for *Eat*. "There's no better way to connect than to share a meal. It builds trust."

S stands for *Serve*. "Serving people in small ways opens doors."

And the final **S**—*Share*—comes last for a reason. "When someone is ready and God opens doors, share what Jesus has done in our lives."

Rob and Bethany weren't starting with a building or a program.

They were starting with prayer—and a table big enough for neighbors.

Reaching hearts for Jesus in the Post-Christian Window is one of our church's greatest mission challenges. To learn more, visit GMSda.org/refocus. Read the rest of this mission story next week.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *2 Corinthians 8:9*

Study Focus: *2 Corinthians 8–9.*

Introduction

A young entrepreneur, Maya, had just launched a small tech startup, focused on community health. Her team was lean, the funding was tight, and the future was uncertain, but they believed deeply in their mission.

During their first profitable quarter, instead of reinvesting everything into growth like most startups, Maya suggested they donate a portion to a nonprofit, helping underserved schools get access to mental health tools. Her team was hesitant. “Shouldn’t we wait until we are more stable?” one asked.

Maya replied, “If we only give when it’s easy, is it really generosity? Let’s lead with purpose, not just profit.”

The company gave. It wasn’t a huge amount, but it was meaningful. Months later, the donation opened unexpected doors—new partnerships, press coverage, and even a major investor who was drawn to their values.

This story mirrors the heart of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9: generosity isn’t about waiting until you’re “ready”—it’s about trusting God, giving from what you have, and watching how He multiplies it for others and for you.

Lesson Themes

Stewardship lies at the heart of this week’s lesson, which will focus on three important themes found in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9:

- 1. Generosity as an Expression of God’s Grace.** The Macedonians gave joyfully despite hardship, showing that true giving comes from the heart, not from abundance (*2 Cor. 8:1–5*).
- 2. Christ, the Model of Generosity.** He gave up His riches to enrich others spiritually.
- 3. Financial Integrity Matters.** Paul ensures accountability in handling the offering in order to protect everyone involved.

Part II: Commentary

1. Background: Corinth as a Commercial Hub: The city of Corinth was strategically located on an isthmus, connecting mainland Greece to

the Peloponnese. Goods from Europe and Asia passed through, making it a center of trade and wealth. The city was rebuilt by Rome in 44 B.C. and populated with freedmen, merchants, and entrepreneurs, contributing to a strong Roman influence and a diverse economic environment. As noted by New Testament scholar Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "The first colonists were ex-slaves from Greece, Syria, Judea, and Egypt who had everything to gain. They began by robbing tombs to make a living, but the site had so much economic potential that within fifty years a number of the citizens were millionaires."—Murphy-O'Connor, "Corinth," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. K. Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006), vol. 1, p. 733.

The most common currencies of Corinth were Roman coins, especially denarii and sesterces, but Greek coins (such as drachmas) were also used. Coins were made of precious metals (silver, bronze, and occasionally, gold), and their value was based on weight and metal content. Trade involved not only coins but also barter and credit systems, especially in larger transactions or among trusted parties. Informal banking was common; money changers and lenders operated in marketplaces or temples, offering loans and currency exchange. Interest rates could be high, and debt could lead to enslavement, especially for the lower class. Temples sometimes functioned as financial centers where people deposited money or secured loans.

A wide gap existed between the rich and poor in Corinth. A well-known proverb, quoted by the Greek geographer Strabo (and also referred to by the Roman poet Horace), summarizes well the ethos of Corinth during this time: "Not for everyone is the voyage to Corinth," meaning that only the tough survived in the city (see *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, p. 734).

Wealthy merchants and landowners lived in luxury, while many others—laborers, artisans, and slaves—lived with much less. The early church in Corinth likely included both wealthy patrons and poorer members, which is why issues of equality and generosity (*as in 2 Corinthians 8, 9*) were so relevant. In Greco-Roman culture, giving was often tied to honor and reciprocity: one gave to gain favor, not out of selfless love. Paul's call for sacrificial, grace-based giving in 2 Corinthians was in radical opposition to this prevailing practice. He exhorted the Corinthians to give, not for gain or status, but from love, equality, and Christlike generosity.

2. Generosity as an Expression of God's Grace: Paul begins his focus on stewardship by using the churches in Macedonia as illustrations for generosity, most likely referring to the congregations in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea (*2 Cor. 8:1–5*). The liberal offerings in these

churches were not because the members were naturally generous or wealthy. Instead, Paul points to God's grace at work in them (*2 Cor. 8:1*). Even in severe trials and poverty, they overflowed in joy and gave generously (*2 Cor. 8:3–5*).

This backdrop sets the tone for the theme of generosity. Generosity isn't just a decision to give—it's a response to divine grace. The Macedonians didn't give because they were pressured or because giving made them look good. Their giving was voluntary, joyful, and sacrificial, motivated by gratitude and love. This kind of giving doesn't make sense by worldly standards—it reflects a heart changed and motivated by grace, not economics or obligation. True generosity flows from a life surrendered to God. When people are fully His, their resources naturally follow. Grace reorients our priorities, making giving not just an act of charity but of worship.

Paul calls giving a “grace”—the same word he uses for spiritual gifts and God's unmerited favor (*charis*). He's saying that generosity is not just a duty; it's a spiritual act, a divine enablement.

3. Christ, the Model of Generosity: Paul's appeal to the Corinthian believers is based on Christ's willingness to give Himself for us while we were still estranged from God. For the Christian, generosity is not about wealth. It's about worship. It's not about guilt or pressure. It's about grace. As we experience the undeserved generosity of God in Christ, we are moved to mirror that grace by giving freely, joyfully, and sacrificially.

Christ as the model of generosity is one of the most profound themes in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. Paul doesn't just teach about giving—he roots it deeply in the gospel. A central verse is 2 Corinthians 8:9, which states: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (*ESV*). This verse is the theological anchor of Paul's appeal.

“*Though he was rich.*” This phrase refers to Christ's pre-existent glory—His divine status, eternal fellowship with the Father, and the riches of heaven.

“*He became poor.*” Jesus emptied Himself, not only by becoming human but by enduring rejection, suffering, and, ultimately, the cross (*Phil. 2:6–8*).

“*So that you . . . might become rich.*” Through His sacrifice, we gain spiritual riches: forgiveness, righteousness, adoption, eternal life.

Paul's point is clear. Generosity isn't about money—it's about self-giving love. And no one has given more than Jesus. Paul doesn't manipulate the Corinthians into giving; he challenges them to let their love reflect Christ's love.

True generosity is proof of transformed hearts, shaped by the example of Jesus' sacrificial love. Voluntary and joyful giving reflects Christ (*2 Cor. 9:7*). Just as Jesus gave Himself willingly and joyfully for our sake (*Heb. 12:2*), believers are called to give in the same spirit—not out of guilt but out of grace-filled joy. Paul reminds the Corinthians that when we give like Christ, we are not depleted—we are resupplied by God's grace. The same God who gave us Christ, our greatest gift, is faithful to give us what we need to be generous.

4. Financial Integrity Matters: Beyond the call to generosity, Paul is deeply concerned with how the money, given to support the struggling church in Jerusalem, is handled. In 2 Corinthians 8:18–21, he very transparently explains the system: “With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel. And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will. We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man” (*ESV*).

Paul makes the case, in 2 Corinthians 8:18–21, that trustworthiness and transparency are two important values in building God's kingdom. These two qualities ensure that everything is done in a manner that is above reproach. Furthermore, they show accountability before God and people, and, finally, they protect the mission—and Paul himself—from any suspicion of misuse.

Paul's example is a model of proactive integrity. Paul doesn't wait for questions to arise; he builds credibility from the beginning. Paul chooses multiple men with proven character to oversee the offering. They aren't just qualified—they are known for their integrity and dedication to the gospel. Their character builds trust in the process and ensures shared responsibility. In Paul's eyes, handling money—especially money given for God's work—is not a casual task. It's a sacred responsibility. God's resources must be managed in a way that honors Him. Integrity in finances is not just about avoiding fraud; it's about maintaining the credibility of the gospel and building trust in the community.

One key reason people hesitate to give is a lack of trust—they fear their money might be misused. Paul addresses this fear head-on. By emphasizing transparency and accountability, he clears the way for greater generosity, because people can give with confidence.

Paul understands that financial integrity isn't just about personal conscience (*2 Cor. 8:21*)—it's about public testimony.

Part III: Life Application

Discuss with your group the following questions as you consider 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 in light of this week's lesson. The questions below are designed to encourage personal reflection, group sharing, and practical application, focusing on the key themes of grace, generosity, financial integrity, and Christlike giving.

- 1. Paul says that giving is a “grace.” How does this notion shift the way we think about generosity?**

- 2. What are some reasons we hesitate to give, even when we can?**

- 3. How do you balance wise stewardship with generous giving in your own life?**

- 4. Read 2 Corinthians 9:6, 7. What does it mean to be a “cheerful” giver, and how can we cultivate this kind of heart?**

- 5. What does Paul mean by “God loves a cheerful giver”? Why does attitude matter in giving?**

- 6. What is one practical step you can take this week to give in a way that reflects God's grace?**

Dealing With False Teachers



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Cor. 10:1–17; Jer. 9:24; 2 Cor. 11:1–15, 22–28; 2 Cor. 12:20, 21; 2 Cor. 13:5.*

Memory Text: “For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds” (*2 Corinthians 10:4, ESV*).

As if Paul didn't have enough problems already, another one arose that he had to deal with as well: false teachers in the church. These people were opposed to him and to his work and ministry. Worse, these false teachers had seduced members of Corinth as well. Paul refers to his fight against this problem as a spiritual war.

Would that be an exaggeration? Not at all. Paul knew that, ultimately, those people were opposing not him but Christ Himself. He was not the narcissistic type of leader concerned about maintaining his reputation as a means of legitimizing his power and authority over his subordinates. He knew that the message he was commissioned to preach was a matter of life or death, with eternal consequences. And he knew that he had been sent to do it by God Himself: “Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God” (*1 Cor. 1:1*).

When it comes to false teachings, the church is supposed to act with love but firmness, based on the authority of Scripture. The gospel message must be conserved, unspoiled and pure, in order to give souls the hope of eternity.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 19.

Spiritual War

Read 2 Corinthians 10:1–11. Paul’s meekness in his dealings with the Corinthians was sometimes confused with weakness. What words or phrases in this passage reveal Paul’s courage in dealing with the problem of false teachers in Corinth?

Paul begins 2 Corinthians 10 very personally: “Now I, Paul, make a personal appeal to you” (2 Cor. 10:1, HCSB). This shows how concerned Paul was about false teachings infiltrating the church. His words in 2 Corinthians 10:1 ironically refer to his opponents’ accusation that he was a frightening bully when writing letters from a distance but a pitiful coward when dealing with people face-to-face (2 Cor. 10:10, 11). He responds that what seemed to be weakness should be seen as powerful meekness and Christlike gentleness.

False teachers must be faced with boldness and confidence (2 Cor. 10:2) but mingled with the gentleness of Christ (2 Cor. 10:1). Jesus once said, “I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29, NIV). However, Jesus also boldly confronted the money changers in the temple by overturning their tables and calling them robbers (Matt. 21:12, 13). He also called the Pharisees hypocrites and whitewashed tombs right to their faces (Matt. 23:23–27). Like Jesus, Paul also knows that we are in a spiritual war that demands the use of God’s whole armor (Eph. 6:12–17).

Paul’s language in 2 Corinthians 10 is military because lives are at stake (2 Cor. 10:3–6). This is not a mere human conflict but a divine battle for winning people to Christ. In that connection, every false argument and lofty opinion must be faced and demolished, based on the Word of God, so that every thought may be brought into captivity “to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5, NIV).

In this spiritual warfare, Paul acts in the authority of Christ. This authority, however, aims at edification, not destruction (2 Cor. 10:8). It is easy for spiritual leaders to affirm that they are acting in the authority of God. Nevertheless, they must remember that their authority is given by Christ, and, like Him, they must be meek and humble in heart. Paul’s claim of his Christ-given authority is due to his concern that the Corinthians were listening to the wrong people, thereby risking their loyalty to Christ.

How can we be simultaneously gentle and bold when dealing with false teachers? Why must we be both?

Boasting in the Lord

Yesterday, we saw that Paul and his fellow workers exerted their ministries as a spiritual warfare, and did so using God’s weapons. Today, we will see that false teachers act according to human criteria. They boast inappropriately. In turn, Paul boasts only in the Lord. As he wrote: “But ‘he who glories, let him glory in the LORD’ ” (2 Cor. 10:17, NKJV).

Read 2 Corinthians 10:13–17. How can an atmosphere of competitiveness harm the preaching of the gospel?

Paul’s use of self-boasting language has intrigued interpreters throughout the centuries. However, self-boasting was a common practice in the ancient world and was controlled by social conventions to avoid offending the audience. Paul knew such conventions, and he followed them. In addition, Paul makes it clear that his way of boasting distinguishes itself from that of the false teachers. He boasts in the Lord (2 Cor. 10:17). This is a quotation from the Old Testament: “Let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth’ ” (Jer. 9:24, ESV). By quoting this passage from Jeremiah, Paul shows that it is Christ who is in focus—Christ’s love, justice, and righteousness.

In other words, Paul’s boasting focuses on God’s accomplishments in Christ. Thus, his boasting is biblical and, hence, inoffensive. On the other hand, his opponents got into an atmosphere of competitiveness by comparing themselves to one another. This is foolishness (2 Cor. 10:12).

In 2 Corinthians 10:14–16, Paul hints that preaching the gospel is the primary focus of his ministry, both in Corinth and in regions beyond Corinth. Paul’s love for Jesus led him to talk constantly about the good news of salvation, found in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Unlike the false teachers in Corinth who commended themselves, Paul had been commended and approved by God (2 Cor. 10:12, 18). He was “called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God” (1 Cor. 1:1, NKJV). He was faithful to this calling until the end of his life (2 Tim. 4:7).

Reread 2 Corinthians 10:12–18. How can church leaders, or even members, avoid an atmosphere of competition? Why is it so easy to get caught up in things that really don’t matter?

False Teachers Identified

The New Testament contains several warnings against false teachers in Christian communities. Jesus Himself warned the disciples about this same thing (*Matt. 7:15–20*). The apostles also called attention to it (*Gal. 1:6–9, 1 Tim. 6:3–5, 2 Pet. 2:1–3*).

Read 2 Corinthians 11:1–15. How does Paul depict the challenges that he is facing with these false teachers?

Paul unmasks the work of false teachers. At the same time, he indicates that his ministry is Christ-centered. He compares the church in Corinth to a bride and identifies himself as her father, with the responsibility to present her to Christ (*2 Cor. 11:2*). He does so because he loves the church (*2 Cor. 11:11*). So, he was even willing not to be a financial burden to it, even though he had the right to be supported by it (*2 Cor. 11:7–12*).

On the other hand, the “most eminent apostles” (ironically, this likely refers to the false teachers) are compared to the serpent that deceived Eve (*2 Cor. 11:3*). Like Satan in the Garden of Eden, the false teachers in Corinth are characterized by deceit and corruption (*2 Cor. 11:3, 4, NKJV*). Paul’s main concern was that they could lead the Corinthians astray from their sincere devotion and allegiance to Christ.

The intruders preached a different message than Paul preached—a different Jesus and a different gospel (*2 Cor. 11:4*). This shows that not everyone who preaches Jesus is a God-commissioned instrument. In that regard, Jesus Himself said, “ ‘Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven’ ” (*Matt. 7:21, NKJV*). In Galatians 1:6–9, Paul says that whoever preaches a different gospel brings a curse upon himself, but some in Corinth tolerated this kind of error.

Paul exposes the false apostles by saying that they are “deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ” (*2 Cor. 11:13, NKJV*). They disguise themselves as apostles of Christ, just as “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” and “his [Satan’s] servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness” (*2 Cor. 11:14, 15, ESV*). What a tragic situation: professing servants of Christ working as agents of Satan. Paul concludes his thought by saying that their “end will be according to their works” (*2 Cor. 11:15, NKJV*).

Look at how strongly he is reacting to error in the church! What should that say to us, as well?

Sufferings for the Sake of the Gospel

After exposing the false teachers as agents of Satan (*2 Cor. 11:1–15*), Paul now “plays” their game by boasting a little as a fool might (*2 Cor. 11:16–21*) so that the Corinthians could see how senseless it was to give ears to the false teachers’ speech. If the Corinthians held them in high regard, Paul deserved higher consideration. His sufferings for the gospel show that he was a faithful servant of Christ (*2 Cor. 11:22, 23*).

Read 2 Corinthians 11:22–28. What point is Paul making here?

While Paul’s Jewish credentials are identical to those of the false teachers (*2 Cor. 11:22*), his service to Christ surpasses theirs (*2 Cor. 11:23*). “Are they ministers of Christ?” he asks. The answer is “I am more.” His labors were more abundant; his imprisonments, more frequent; his beatings, more severe.

But this is not all. His list of sufferings also includes five instances of thirty-nine strokes (*2 Cor. 11:24*), beatings with rods, stoning, shipwrecks, danger in deep waters (*2 Cor. 11:25*), danger at journeys, danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from countrymen, danger from Gentiles, danger in crowded cities, danger in desolate country, danger at sea, danger from false believers (*2 Cor. 11:26*), strenuous labors, exhausting toils, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, food shortage, cold, and nakedness (*2 Cor. 11:27*). As if that weren’t enough, he still had to deal with mental anguish because of his deep anxiety for the churches (*2 Cor. 11:28*).

Only a true servant of Christ would be willing to suffer like this for the gospel. If Paul were really to boast about his sufferings, he had much to say. However, the next section of the letter shows that the reason for his boast was based not on what he did for Christ but on what Christ had done for him. Paul knew that God’s power is more visibly displayed in human weakness (*2 Cor. 12:9, 10*). By giving him a thorn in the flesh (*2 Cor. 12:7*), God protected Paul from boasting about his accomplishments. This kept him humble, aware of his weakness, dependent on divine power, and in the condition of receiving more of God’s grace and mercy.

Have you also been suffering for the sake of the gospel? What have you learned from this experience? How can the way Paul dealt with his sufferings help you deal with yours?

Appeal to the Unrepentant

In 2 Corinthians 12:14–13:10, Paul informs the church about his third visit (*2 Cor. 12:14, 2 Cor. 13:1*). He had shown that he is not inferior to any of the false apostles and is now confident to come to Corinth once again and try to restore unrepentant members. In fact, this was one of the primary purposes of this visit. All Paul did and spoke was meant for the edification of the church (*2 Cor. 12:19*).

Read 2 Corinthians 12:20, 21. What sins were jeopardizing the spiritual condition of the Corinthian church?

The list of sins in 2 Corinthians 12:20, 21 is similar to others found elsewhere in Paul's letters (*Rom. 1:29–31, Gal. 5:19–21*). The first two items appear in 1 Corinthians 3:3, where Paul refers to jealousy and strife among the members in Corinth. Paul fears that things would not be too different by the time of his third visit. He says, "I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish." Conversely, he says, "You may find me not as you wish" (*2 Cor. 12:20, ESV*). This means that rather than dealing with them "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (*2 Cor. 10:1, ESV*), he would now be "ready to punish every disobedience" (*2 Cor. 10:6, ESV*).

His main concern is that those members who had been involved with "impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality" may not have repented (*2 Cor. 12:21, ESV*). And it is sins such as these that cause divisions in the church.

Next, Paul focuses on the role of church discipline to restore those in sin (*2 Cor. 13:1–4*). Weakness is not an excuse for a sinful way of life. There is power available for those who want to live a victorious life (*2 Cor. 13:4*). The fact that some in Corinth practiced sexual sin is evidence that God's power was not a reality in their lives. Paul wanted them to repent and experience the power that leads to obedience. Disciplining them was the last thing he wanted to do. He says, "We pray to God that you may not do wrong . . . , but that you may do what is right. . . . Your restoration is what we pray for" (*2 Cor. 13:7–9, ESV*). What a beautiful prayer! He asks them to examine themselves to see whether they are in the faith.

**Read 2 Corinthians 13:5. What does it mean to be in the faith?
How can you know that you are in the faith?**

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Laodicean Church,” p. 125, in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 30, 1873.

“The Lord is guarding his people against a repetition of the errors and mistakes of the past. There have always abounded false teachers who, advocating erroneous doctrines and unholy practices, and working upon false principles in a most specious, covered, deceptive manner, have endeavored to deceive, if possible, the very elect.”—Ellen G. White, in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 7, 1904.

“The Lord designs that our opinions shall be put to the test, that we may see the necessity of closely examining the living oracles to see whether or not we are in the faith. Many who claim to believe the truth have settled down at their ease, saying, ‘I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing.’”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 36.

“Men entertain errors, when the truth is clearly marked out; and if they would but bring their doctrines to the word of God, and not read the word of God in the light of their doctrines, to prove their ideas right, they would not walk in darkness and blindness, or cherish error. Many give the words of Scripture a meaning that suits their own opinions, and they mislead themselves and deceive others by their misinterpretations of God’s word. As we take up the study of God’s word, we should do so with humble hearts. All selfishness, all love of originality, should be laid aside. Long-cherished opinions must not be regarded as infallible.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, pp. 36, 37.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read 2 Corinthians 10:1–6 again. What is Paul’s strategy to face spiritual “wars” for God’s truth, and how can we apply it to our own spiritual wars?
- 2 The Bible says that before the end comes, many false teachers would try to lure people away from the truth. What can your local church do to prevent members from being persuaded by false teachers who might even be in your same church? Why is this so essential for the fulfillment of the church’s mission?
- 3 Why did Paul find it necessary to boast about a long list of sufferings (2 Cor. 11:16–33)? Also, what does it mean “to boast in the Lord”?
- 4 Why is it important for church members to examine themselves in order to see whether they are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5)? What difference does it make?

BLESS You! Part 2

By OFFICE OF ADVENTIST MISSION

Rob and Bethany are church planters in Copenhagen, Denmark. But before this, they learned principles of relationship-based ministry while they started a church in Squamish, British Columbia.

There, they made a friend who had grown up in an Adventist home but whose experiences had left him skeptical and jaded. The Christian path he had been shown was unbalanced, with prophecy studies intermingled with conspiracy theories and anxiety replacing the peace of salvation. As an adult, he distanced himself entirely.

But over time, something about Rob and Bethany's way of living began to break down his defenses. They invited him into their lives—meals, conversations, shared routines.

He watched them. He listened. "He could sense that what we were doing was real," Rob said. "We weren't just going through motions. We were trying to live like Jesus. We really cared about him and wanted to be his friend."

When a personal crisis hit, the man reached out—not to a church, but to the family he'd grown to trust. He began to ask questions. And eventually, he chose to believe again—but this time, in a Jesus he'd never known before.

Now he's a passionate Christian, committed and transformed.

And it started with simple things: listening, serving, and living the gospel through daily life.

"There's nothing more exciting than being part of someone's spiritual journey," Rob reflected. "Start with the basics—begin with prayer, listen, eat, serve, and when the time comes, share. That's how Jesus did it. And that's how hearts are still changed today."

Now in Copenhagen, Rob and Bethany meet new friends in their neighborhood and through local events. Their home is open for fellowship and shared meals on a regular basis. They are always on the lookout for who they can invest in—listening, serving, supporting, sharing. From their past experience, they know that this is the most effective way to love people today. And they pray daily that God will bless them with real friendships along this church-planting journey.

Please pray for our missionaries who serve in the Post-Christian Window, one of the greatest mission challenges our church faces today. To learn more, visit GMsda.org/refocus.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *2 Corinthians 10:4*

Study Focus: *2 Corinthians 10–12.*

Introduction

Imagine you're hiking in unfamiliar mountains with a small group. The terrain is rugged, the fog thick, and you're unsure of the path. Suddenly, a confident man appears. He's dressed like a park ranger, has a walkie-talkie, and even carries a map. He says, "You're headed the wrong way. Follow me—I know a shortcut."

Relieved, the group follows him. He walks with authority, tells stories of past rescues, and seems to know every twist and turn. But after an hour, the path becomes narrower, more dangerous, and nothing looks right. Someone checks his GPS and realizes your *guide* is not leading you toward safety. He's leading you deeper into the wilderness.

For sure, he looked the part. He sounded convincing. But he wasn't a guide—he was a fraud. And the consequences of continuing to follow him could've been deadly.

Paul is dealing with this same problem in 2 Corinthians 10–12. False teachers had crept into the church, presenting themselves as apostles, speaking with charisma and authority. But they were preaching a different Jesus and leading people away from the truth.

Paul's response isn't just about defending himself. It's about protecting the church from being led into spiritual danger by impostors who looked and sounded the part but were nothing like the real thing.

Lesson Themes

This week, three important themes of 2 Corinthians 10–12 will be highlighted and discussed as we focus on the question of how we should deal with spiritual frauds and false teachers. The themes are as follows:

- 1. Defense of Apostolic Authority.** Paul begins to defend his ministry, responding to accusations that he is bold in letters but weak in person (*2 Cor. 10:1, 2, 10*).
- 2. The Danger of False Apostles.** Paul expresses concern about the fact that the Corinthian church is being led astray from pure devotion to Christ (*2 Cor. 11:2, 3*).
- 3. Spiritual Warfare.** Paul emphasizes that his weapons are not worldly but spiritual, having "divine power to destroy strongholds" (*2 Cor. 10:4, ESV*).

Part II: Commentary

1. Background: Public Oratory in First-Century A.D. Corinth: In the first century, the church in Corinth was a young, diverse community in a wealthy, immoral, and philosophically minded Greek city. As a major port, Corinth attracted a flood of religious ideas, teachers, and philosophies. In this environment, it was common for popular Greek teachers—especially rhetoricians, philosophers, and Sophists—to make a living by charging wealthy audiences for lectures, private lessons, or mentorship. A teacher’s value was often measured by his fee; Protagoras charged high rates, and Isocrates ran an elite school where students paid substantial tuition. Status mattered greatly, and such teachers as Gorgias performed elaborate public speeches to attract paying students. Even Dio Chrysostom criticized such figures, saying, “They are like actors on a stage, performing not for truth, but for silver and applause” (*Orations* 32.11).

Rhetorical power was often associated with virility and manhood. “Any man who aspired to a position of leadership in the first-century Roman world would have been subject to an almost continuous evaluation of his virility by his auditors and rivals.”—Jennifer Larson, “Paul’s Masculinity,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 123, no. 1 (2004), p. 87.

Against this backdrop, Paul faced opposition from false teachers in Corinth. These Jewish-Christian missionaries, whom Paul mockingly called “super-apostles” (*2 Cor. 11:5, 2 Cor. 12:11, ESV*), attacked Paul for his lack of speaking skills, his sufferings, and his refusal to charge money—behaviors that, by Greek standards, seemed unimpressive. The false teachers promoted a more legalistic, works-based gospel, flaunted spiritual experiences, and carried letters of recommendation to boost their standings. Their influence threatened the purity of the gospel, urging the church to judge leaders by outward success rather than by Christlike humility. Paul deliberately countered this influence by working as a tent-maker (*Acts 18:3*) and preaching without remuneration (*2 Cor. 11:7–9*), though some saw these practices as a mark of weakness. Paul reminded the Corinthians that, unlike him, these false teachers were those who make “slaves of you” and take “advantage of you” (*2 Cor. 11:20, ESV*).

2. Defense of Apostolic Authority: In 2 Corinthians 10 and 11, Paul passionately defends his apostolic authority and ministry against criticism and false teachings. In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul addresses the accusation that “‘his letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account’ ” (*2 Cor. 10:10, ESV*), asserting that his authority comes directly from Christ, not from his own strength or wisdom. He emphasizes that his boasting is not out of pride, claiming that he “will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you” (*2 Cor. 10:13*,

ESV). Paul explains that he does not boast about things beyond the scope of his mission, nor does he compare himself to others. Rather, his authority is defined by God’s will, and any recognition he receives is for the purpose of advancing the gospel in the areas God has assigned to him (*2 Cor. 10:15, 16*). While some may consider him humble in person, his letters reflect the seriousness of his mission, and he is prepared to act decisively when needed (*2 Cor. 10:11*).

In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul expresses his “jealousy” for the Corinthians, a deep, protective love, fearing that they might be led astray by false apostles (*2 Cor. 11:2, 3*). These false apostles disguise themselves as “servants of righteousness” (*2 Cor. 11:15, ESV*). In reality, they are deceitful and dangerous. Paul warns that such individuals are like Satan, who masquerades as an “angel of light” (*2 Cor. 11:14, ESV*—in 2 Corinthians 11:3, he already referenced the serpent deceiving Eve), and their teachings distort the gospel. He urges the Corinthians to be vigilant and discerning, reminding them that his own ministry is founded on integrity and the truth of Christ, in stark contrast to the falsehoods of the deceitful workers (*2 Cor. 11:13*).

3. The Danger of False Apostles: In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul addresses the danger posed by false apostles, emphasizing themes of godly jealousy, the distortion of the gospel, and the deception of spiritual leaders. He begins by expressing his deep concern for the Corinthians, fearing that they are being led astray from a sincere devotion to Christ (*2 Cor. 11:2, 3*). Paul warns against those who preach a different Jesus or a different gospel, urging the Corinthians to remain true to the teachings they initially received (*2 Cor. 11:4*). He directly calls out these false apostles, describing them as deceitful workers who masquerade as true representatives of Christ (*2 Cor. 11:13*), even going so far as to warn that Satan himself can appear as an angel of light (*2 Cor. 11:14*).

In a striking contrast, Paul sarcastically adopts the tone of his opponents, exposing their foolishness and boasting in his own sufferings for the sake of Christ (*2 Cor. 11:21–30*). By doing so, he exposes the deceptive nature of these false teachers, showing how their self-promotion stands in stark contrast to the authentic sacrifice and weakness Paul willingly embraces in his ministry. Furthermore, in 2 Corinthians 12, Paul recounts a vision of heaven but downplays it, refusing to boast (*2 Cor. 12:1–6*). He speaks of a “thorn in the flesh” given to keep him humble, showing that God’s power is made perfect in weakness (*2 Cor. 12:7–10*). Paul reminds the Corinthians that he demonstrated the signs of a true apostle through patience, signs, wonders, and miracles (*2 Cor. 12:12*), contrasting his selfless motivations with those of the false teachers. He expresses a deep desire to build them up rather than burden them, highlighting his genuine concern for the church and his dedication to their spiritual well-being (*2 Cor. 12:14–18*).

4. Spiritual Warfare: In 2 Corinthians 10:4, Paul emphasizes that the battle he faces is not fought with worldly weapons but with spiritual ones that “have divine power to destroy strongholds” (*ESV*). This passage highlights the concept of spiritual warfare, in which the enemy is not human or earthly but spiritual in nature—manifested in the forces of darkness and deception that seek to undermine the truth of the gospel. Paul is not referring to physical battles or earthly struggles, but to the unseen battle that believers are engaged in as they strive to live according to God’s truth in a world full of opposing ideologies and false teachings. In 2 Corinthians 11:13, Paul calls attention to the false apostles and their teachings, describing them as “deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (*ESV*) who distort the gospel and lead others astray. These false teachers are part of the strongholds Paul is seeking to dismantle. Their deceptive arguments and teachings are like fortresses that oppose the truth of Christ and keep people in spiritual bondage.

The phrase “divine power” (*ESV*), in 2 Corinthians 10:4, highlights the fact that the power behind these spiritual weapons comes from God alone, and they are effective because they align with His divine authority and purpose. Paul’s reference to the destruction of enemy strongholds refers to the dismantling of the deeply entrenched arguments, ideologies, and thought patterns that oppose God’s truth. In the context of his ministry, such dismantling involves confronting false apostles and their teachings that promote “another Jesus” and “a different gospel” (*2 Cor. 11:4, ESV*). These false apostles use manipulation and deceit to subvert the true message of Christ, and Paul recognizes that such falsehoods create spiritual strongholds in the minds of believers. The strongholds are metaphorical, representing thinking patterns and worldviews that lead to spiritual oppression and keep individuals in bondage to sin and error.

Part III: Life Application

Discuss with your group the questions that follow, keeping in mind all we have learned about 2 Corinthians 10–12.

- 1. What are some modern examples of “another Jesus” or “a different gospel” in 2 Corinthians 11:4? How can we recognize when someone is twisting the truth?**

- 2. In 2 Corinthians 10:7, 10, the Corinthians judged Paul by outward appearance and speech. Why is it dangerous to judge spiritual authority based on charisma, appearance, or speaking skills alone?**

3. What does true spiritual authority look like according to Paul? How is it different from secular leadership?

4. In 2 Corinthians 10:3–5, Paul talks about demolishing arguments and taking thoughts captive. How can we actively guard our minds and beliefs against false teaching today?

5. Why do you think Paul chose to highlight his sufferings instead of his spiritual experiences? What does His decision teach us about evaluating leaders?

6. Why do people sometimes tolerate, or even admire, false teachers? What makes false teaching so appealing?

7. Have you ever encountered a “false teacher” or a misleading teaching? What happened? How did you discern either one, and what did you learn from the experience?

Grace, Love, and Fellowship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: 2 Cor. 8:9; Rom. 16:20; 1 John 4:8–11; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 2:1, 2; Gal. 4:4–6.

Memory Text: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14, *ESV*).

Paul closes 2 Corinthians by re-emphasizing essential elements addressed in his letters. He does this through five imperatives (2 Cor. 13:11).

The first imperative, “Rejoice” (*ESV*), recalls earlier texts in the letters.

The second imperative, “Strive for full restoration” (*NIV*), translates a single word in Greek (*katartizō*), which appears here and in 1 Corinthians 1:10.

The third, “Encourage one another” (*NIV*), resumes 2 Corinthians 1:3–7. Paul begins and closes his second letter with encouragement. We receive God’s encouragement in order to encourage others (2 Cor. 1:4, 6).

The fourth and fifth imperatives, “Be of one mind, live in peace” (2 Cor. 13:11, *NKJV*), are a call to unity. This atmosphere of joy, restoration, encouragement, unity, and peace is the condition for the presence of God, “the God of love and peace” (2 Cor. 13:11, *ESV*). It results from our triune God’s work in the human heart (2 Cor. 13:14).

Grace, love, and fellowship result from the work of the triune God for us. These three Christian features promote an atmosphere characterized by God’s presence.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 26.

The Grace of Jesus

It is inspiring that at the end of 2 Corinthians, we see a reference to the grace of Jesus, just as in the opening (2 Cor. 1:2, 2 Cor. 13:14). Paul begins and closes this letter with a reference to His grace. As we saw at the beginning of this quarter, he couldn't stop thinking and speaking about Jesus.

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9, *NKJV*).

How admirable and irresistible is the grace of Jesus! He left the riches of His eternal existence in heaven to become poor. He walked down the dusty roads of ancient Galilee. “He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (*Phil. 2:8, ESV*). He did so in order for us to become “rich,” namely, for us to have a chance to be with Him in heaven. It's hard for us, who have known only a world of sin, death, and suffering even to begin to grasp what it meant for Jesus to have left the courts of heaven in order to come here and offer His life for us.

Read Romans 16:20, Galatians 6:18, Philippians 4:23, and 1 Thessalonians 5:28. What important teaching do you see in these passages?

Paul refers to the grace of Jesus very often in his letters. Some pearls include, “The free gift by the grace of . . . Jesus Christ abounded for many” (*Rom. 5:15, ESV*). Those who receive this abundance of grace will “reign in life through . . . Jesus” (*Rom. 5:17, ESV*). As occurs with 2 Corinthians, Paul also begins and ends other letters mentioning the grace of Jesus (*Rom. 1:7, Rom. 16:20, 1 Cor. 1:3, 1 Cor. 16:23, Gal. 1:3, Gal. 6:18, Phil. 1:2, Phil. 4:23*). This topic occupied his thoughts, and he wanted it to fill the minds of the Corinthians, too.

This was his wish for all the churches. Notice what he says to the Ephesians: “Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love” (*Eph. 6:24, NIV*). Would he wish for us to love Jesus less than that, an undying love? Certainly not. After all, his wish was for the grace of Jesus to reach “more and more people” (2 Cor. 4:15, *NIV*) and become sufficient for them just as it was for him (2 Cor. 12:9).

Think about God's grace toward you like this. What do you deserve for the kind of things you have said and done? What, however, does God's grace offer you instead?

The Love of God

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen” (2 Cor. 13:14, *NKJV*). With this verse, Paul ends his second letter. Notice that he mentions the three Persons of the Trinity in this order—Son, Father, and Holy Spirit. It is through the work of all three that we can better understand what God is like and what He has done for us.

Read John 3:16, 17; Romans 8:37–39; and 1 John 4:8–11. What do these passages tell us about the love of God?

First John 4:8 says that “God is love.” Love is an essential attribute of God. John emphasizes that we can know love in that God gave His only Son to die for us (*John 3:16*). God sent Jesus on a rescue mission (*John 3:17*), and this was part of the project of salvation (*Acts 3:20, 21; 1 John 4:10, 14*). Jesus referred to the Father several times in the Gospels as the One who sent Him (*Matt. 10:40, Mark 9:37*).

In a remarkable statement, Paul says, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (*Rom. 5:8, NIV*). We can glimpse God’s love in the sweet relationship between husband and wife, as well as parents and their children, in sincere friendships, and so forth. We can also see God’s love in nature. In that regard, Ellen G. White says, “ ‘God is love’ is written upon every opening bud, upon every spire of springing grass. The lovely birds making the air vocal with their happy songs, the delicately tinted flowers in their perfection perfuming the air, the lofty trees of the forest with their rich foliage of living green—all testify to the tender, fatherly care of our God and to His desire to make His children happy.”—*Steps to Christ*, p. 10.

However, nothing is more convincing than God’s giving Jesus as a sacrifice for our sins. When we understand that God loved us to the point of sending Jesus to lay down His life for us, our response is willingness “to lay down our lives for the brothers” (*1 John 3:16, ESV*).

Paul wanted the Corinthians to live in unity. However, without love, there is no unity. That is why he taught them that “love builds up” (*1 Cor. 8:1, ESV*) and that without love, everything is useless and empty (*1 Cor. 13:1–3*). So, all we do must be done in love (*1 Cor. 16:14*), a love that is an extension of God’s love.

What would we lose in the gospel if Jesus Himself were not fully and eternally God?

The God of Love

In the ancient pagan world, people did not believe that the gods loved humans. Instead, the gods were malevolent and furious, and were supposed to be appeased. The idea of a God of love, as we see in the Bible, was a novelty. As surprising as this statement was in his time, Paul characterizes our God as “the God of love and peace” (2 Cor. 13:11).

Read 2 Corinthians 13:11. How can you draw hope from what is said here? How can you better experience what this verse teaches?

The phrase “the God of love and peace” can be interpreted in two different ways. On one hand, God is seen as the source of love and peace. On the other hand, God is characterized by love and peace. It is not necessary, however, to decide between the two. Because love and peace are intrinsic characteristics of God, He gives us love and peace.

Elsewhere, Paul refers to God as “the God of endurance and encouragement” (Rom. 15:5, *ESV*); “of hope” (Rom. 15:13, *ESV*); “of peace” (Rom. 15:33, Rom. 16:20, 1 Cor. 14:33, Phil. 4:9, 1 Thess. 5:23), “the Father of mercies” (2 Cor. 1:3), and “the God of all comfort” (2 Cor. 1:3). God is the source of all these blessings. He gives them to us all out of His unfailing love.

Also, although the phrase “God of peace” is somewhat common in the Bible, the phrase “God of love” occurs only here (2 Cor. 13:11), and, hence, it deserves our most profound reflection.

As many interpreters have noticed, Paul’s reference to the God of love a few verses before the trinitarian benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14 suggests that he thinks of God as three Persons. “Though he uses the word ‘God’ here as one of the three, his understanding of Jesus and the Spirit elsewhere in his letters . . . forces us to see the whole phrase as describing the one God whom the earliest church came to see in threefold form. It would be over a century before theologians . . . began to use words like ‘trinity’ as a shorthand way of expressing what Paul is already articulating.”—Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), p. 148.

We believe in one God, the unity of three Persons who live eternally in a relationship of love. This triune God loves us and summons us to love one another in a way that reflects the love among the Three Members of the Godhead.

The Fellowship of the Holy Spirit

The grace of Jesus not only reveals the love of God for us but also brings the fellowship of the Spirit as a further effect of that love. At the same time, fellowship has its source in the love of God. And that is because without love, there is no fellowship. As Paul writes: “Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind” (*Phil. 2:1, 2, NKJV*).

Some people say that the Holy Spirit is only a force or influence, but that cannot be true. After all, why would Paul mention two persons—the Father and the Son—along with a mere “force” in a trinitarian formula? That would make no sense. Just as the Father and the Son are presented in a personal relationship (*2 Cor. 1:3, 2 Cor. 11:31*), the relationship of the Spirit with persons leads us to the conclusion that He is also a person (*Rom. 8:15, 16; see also John 14:16, 17, 26; John 15:26*).

The phrase “fellowship of the Spirit” (*Phil. 2:1*) can be understood in two ways. It can mean fellowship with one another granted by the Spirit, or fellowship with the Spirit Himself. Several Bible interpreters argue that these senses are not mutually exclusive. After all, fellowship with one another is the consequence of fellowship with the Spirit.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:10, 11; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 1 Corinthians 12:11; and 2 Corinthians 3:6, 17. What did Paul teach the Corinthians about the Spirit?

Paul has much to say about the work of the Spirit. In 1 and 2 Corinthians, there are more than forty references to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit promotes the edification of the church (*1 Cor. 14:12*), enables people for mission (*1 Cor. 2:4, 5*), reveals the deep things of God to us (*1 Cor. 2:10, 11*), and teaches them to us (*1 Cor. 2:13*), dwells in us (*1 Cor. 3:16, 1 Cor. 6:19*), works with Christ for our justification (*1 Cor. 6:11*), bestows spiritual gifts to the church (*1 Corinthians 12–14*), seals us for salvation (*2 Cor. 1:22*), imprints the law in human hearts (*2 Cor. 3:3*), and gives new life in Christ (*2 Cor. 3:6*), and freedom from sin (*2 Cor. 3:17*). For sure, we cannot live without the Holy Spirit.

Why, too, is an understanding of the divinity of the Holy Spirit important for fully grasping God’s love for us?

Our Triune God

When reading 2 Corinthians 13:14, one may think that Christ is the only source of grace, God is the only source of love, and the Holy Spirit is the only source of fellowship, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:3, 4, 9; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 2 Corinthians 1:2, 12; Romans 8:35; Romans 15:30; Galatians 2:20; and Ephesians 3:19. What do these passages say about grace, love, and fellowship in connection with the members of the Trinity?

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit work together for our salvation. Grace, love, and fellowship come not from only one but the Three Members of the Godhead. Yet, each One has specific functions in the history of salvation. Paul is aware of that and emphasizes this teaching in his letters. For instance, the plan of salvation is told with an incredible economy of words in Galatians 4:4–6, with the respective participation of the Three Members of the Godhead. God the Father sent Jesus, which suggests that the Father is the Source of that plan (*Gal. 4:4*). The Son was born of a woman (*Gal. 4:4*), which is a reference to the Incarnation and points to the fulfillment of an ancient promise (*Gen. 3:15*). The Son redeemed us and brought us back to the correct relationship with the Father, whom Satan had lied about (*Gen. 3:5*). And the Holy Spirit legitimizes our identity as children of God (*Gal. 4:6*).

There are several other references to the Trinity in the Pauline letters. The three act together, enabling the church for mission (*1 Cor. 12:4–6*), giving us spiritual strength (*Eph. 3:14–19*), and promoting a profound unity among church members, one that replicates the unity that marks the very relationship of the members of the Godhead (*Eph. 4:4–6*). In Paul's understanding, not only is God triune, but also the three Persons of the Godhead work together for our salvation (*Eph. 1:3, 13, 14*). In Ephesians, Paul goes so far as to mention that we must be filled with the fullness of the Father (*Eph. 3:19*), the Son (*Eph. 4:13*), and the Holy Spirit (*Eph. 5:18*).

In bringing the correspondence with the Corinthians to a close (*2 Cor. 13:14*), Paul could not finish with a better ending—a promise that the three Dignitaries of the universe, the heavenly Trio, would be with us now and in the age to come.

How should fellowship among church members reflect the lovely relationship of the Godhead?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “ ‘Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled,’ ” pp. 662–680, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“The grace of Jesus Christ alone can change the heart of stone to a heart of flesh, and make it alive unto God. . . . Men have no power to justify the soul, to sanctify the heart. Moral disease cannot be healed save through the power of the great Physician. The highest gift of heaven, even the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth, is alone able to redeem the lost.”—Ellen G. White, in *The Signs of the Times*, May 2, 1892.

“ ‘God is love.’ 1 John 4:16. His nature, His law, is love. It ever has been; it ever will be. ‘The high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity,’ whose ‘ways are everlasting,’ changeth not. With Him ‘is no variable-ness, neither shadow of turning.’ Isaiah 57:15; Habakkuk 3:6; James 1:17. Every manifestation of creative power is an expression of infinite love. The sovereignty of God involves fullness of blessing to all created beings. . . . The history of the great conflict between good and evil, from the time it first began in heaven to the final overthrow of rebellion and the total eradication of sin, is also a demonstration of God’s unchanging love.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 33.

“We need to realize that the Holy Spirit . . . is as much a person as God is a person. . . . The Holy Spirit has a personality, else He could not bear witness to our spirits and with our spirits that we are the children of God. He must also be a divine person, else He could not search out the secrets which lie hidden in the mind of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By*, p. 52.

“There are three living persons of the heavenly trio; in the name of these three great powers—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—those who receive Christ by living faith are baptized, and these powers will cooperate with the obedient subjects of heaven in their efforts to live the new life in Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 615.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 A well-known Christian song is entitled “Amazing Grace.” What is amazing about the grace of Jesus?
- 2 A beautiful portrayal of God’s love can be found in the parable of the prodigal son. How do we know the father in this parable is a loving father?
- 3 How can local churches demonstrate that the “fellowship of the Spirit” is a reality there?

Begun in a Bar

By RICK KAJIURA

People in the village scoffed. “These Christians must be deluded to think we would worship God in a building with such a wicked past,” they declared.

Leenus, a Global Mission (GM) pioneer in Kenya, had an unlikely setting for growing a thriving congregation—a small room that used to be a bar. His ministry as a GM pioneer also had an unlikely start. He was a pastor of a different faith, but was raising a new group of Seventh-day Adventist believers.

Leenus became an Adventist after attending evangelistic meetings and studying the Voice of Prophecy (VOP) Bible lessons. “I found there was truth in them,” he said. He set out to share that truth with his former members as soon as he was baptized.

Leenus registered 360 people in the VOP Bible study course. He went from home to home, answering questions until every one of them had completed the course. To his delight, 15 of them requested baptism.

The conference leaders conducted the baptisms and told Leenus he would lead the new flock. But they changed their minds. They were so impressed by Leenus’s ability to reach others they made him a GM pioneer. “They told me to go into the interior and fetch more people,” Leenus said.

When Leenus arrived in the new town, there was no Adventist presence. He went door to door, sharing the Adventist faith. After much effort, one person accepted the message. “I told this man, ‘Hold my hand, and together we will reach others.’”

Leenus held a series of evangelistic meetings, and several community members attended. When they asked, “Where is your church” Leenus had to tell them that they were meeting in a shop.

“No, no!” they said, learning that the shop was once a bar. “We can’t worship God there. That’s impossible.”

Leenus was tempted to feel discouraged, but he soon realized God had a plan. “God wanted us to start in a bar so He could use His power and people to support us.”

Leenus prayed about having a church and, eventually, God helped him acquire land and people to help build the structure. Now, 10 members meet every week on Sabbath in the brand-new church. Some come from as far as 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) away. Leenus plans to hold evangelistic meetings in the community. He believes having a new church has helped people feel God is with the church plant. “They can see that God is doing something for us. He is expanding us and helping us grow.”

Please pray for Global Mission pioneers who, like Leenus, have accepted the challenge of planting churches among unreached people groups around the world. Learn more about Global Mission pioneers: bit.ly/GMPioneers.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *2 Corinthians 13:14*

Study Focus: *2 Cor. 13:11–14.*

Introduction

Imagine you're at the airport, saying goodbye to a close friend or loved one. You've spent meaningful time together—maybe even worked through some challenges. As your friend or loved one is about to go through security, he or she turns back to say something, perhaps only a few words. But it is something that you'll remember long after the flight has taken off.

Maybe it was:

“Take care of yourself.”

“Keep doing what you love.”

“Don't forget—I believe in you.”

Final words linger. They may be brief, but they often carry the deepest emotion, the most urgent reminder, or the core message that their speaker wants you to remember.

The apostle Paul often closes his letters in the New Testament in much the same way. After chapters of teaching, correction, defense, encouragement, and doctrine, Paul doesn't just sign off casually. His final words are intentional and often are compact expressions of grace, love, and fellowship—the very heart of the gospel and of the Christian community.

Paul doesn't just end his letters; he blesses, reaffirms, and refocuses his readers on what matters most. So, when we study the endings of Paul's letters—especially 2 Corinthians 13:11–14—we're not just reading polite farewells. We're hearing the echo of Paul's heartbeat and, perhaps, more important, the heartbeat of God.

Lesson Themes

In this week's lesson, we will focus on the three key concepts of 2 Corinthians 13:11–14 that can be found in Paul's concluding words to the Corinthian church:

- 1. Grace Is the Starting Point.** It is also Jesus' gift.
- 2. Love Is the Sustaining Force.** Love is also God's nature.
- 3. Fellowship Is the Relational Outcome.** Likewise, fellowship is also the Spirit's work, which is essential for a healthy Christian community.

Part II: Commentary

1. Background: Letter-Writing Practices: In the New Testament era, letter writing was a common, and essential, means of communication, especially in the Greco-Roman world, where figures such as philosophers, teachers, and leaders often sent letters that followed a standard format: greeting, thanksgiving, body, and closing. Paul adopted this structure, but he infused it with deep theological and pastoral meaning. He usually dictated his letters to a scribe (*amanuensis*) and then had those letters delivered by trusted messengers, such as Timothy or Phoebe.

Paul's greetings often merged Jewish and Greek customs ("grace and peace"), and his closings were more than farewells—they reflected his care, spiritual priorities, and relationship with the recipients. In 1 Corinthians 16:19–24, Paul ends with greetings from other churches, a personal signature to validate the letter, a stern warning for those who do not love Christ, and a heartfelt blessing, emphasizing grace and his enduring love for the Corinthians.

In contrast, 2 Corinthians 13:11–14 closes with gentler exhortations toward joy, unity, and peace, culminating in a powerful blessing from the triune Godhead: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (*2 Cor. 13:14, ESV*). These endings showcase Paul's unique blend of doctrine and personal connection, turning the final words of his letters into lasting spiritual encouragements, focusing on grace, love, and fellowship.

2. The Starting Point of Grace: In 2 Corinthians 13:11–14, Paul concludes his letter with a powerful and theologically rich benediction, placing a strong emphasis on the theme of grace. He begins the blessing with "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ," highlighting grace as the foundational element of the Christian life. This grace, expressed through Christ's self-giving (*as seen earlier in 2 Corinthians 8:9*), enables restoration, unity, and peace within the troubled Corinthian church.

Paul's decision to end not with rebuke but with grace reflects his deep pastoral heart and mirrors the way he ends nearly all his letters. For example, the books of Romans (*Rom. 16:20*), Galatians (*Gal. 6:18*), and Philippians (*Phil. 4:23*) all close with similar appeals to the sustaining presence of Christ's grace. In 2 Corinthians 13:11–14, grace leads into love (from God the Father) and fellowship (through the Holy Spirit), forming a structure that encapsulates the full scope

of divine relationship. For Paul, grace is not merely a theological concept but the living power that unites believers with God and one another. Thus, the apostle consistently uses it as the final word in his letters to remind the church that it is grace that saves, sustains, and empowers the Christian community.

3. The Sustaining Power of Love: Paul concludes his letter (*2 Cor. 13:11–14*) with an appeal to unity and peace, culminating in one of the richest blessings in the New Testament. A central theme in this passage is love, especially as an expression of God’s nature. In *2 Corinthians 13:14*, Paul places “the love of God”—as a key part of the believer’s experience of God—alongside grace and fellowship. This love is not a vague sentiment but the very essence of who God is—the Source of both salvation and the life of the Christian community. This love undergirds the exhortations in *2 Corinthians 13:11*, in which believers are encouraged to aim for restoration, to comfort one another, to be of one mind, and to live in peace. These commands to the church members are possible only when members first are grounded in the self-giving, reconciling love that comes from God.

Paul consistently emphasizes this theme of reconciliation at the close of his letters. In *Romans 15:30*, he appeals to the church “by the love of the Spirit” (*ESV*) to strive together in prayer, showing that love is the motivating force, even in spiritual work.

In *Ephesians 6:23, 24*, Paul ends with “Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” and then adds, “Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible” (*ESV*). Here, love is both divine in origin and human in response—a reflection of God’s own love given to the believer. Similarly, in *1 Thessalonians 3:12*, Paul prays, “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you” (*ESV*), again tying love both to God’s work and to the church’s witness.

In *2 Corinthians 13*, then, Paul is not merely signing off—he is summarizing the gospel. The “love of God” is the source of the “grace of Christ” and of the “fellowship of the Spirit.” Only in this letter does Paul employ the formula of the Three-in-One Deity “in the epilogue to highlight the distinctive roles of the Godhead in the work of salvation.”—“*2 Corinthians*,” in *Andrews Bible Commentary*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez et al. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), p. 1685. Love is the initiating attribute of God that reaches out in grace and binds believers together in fellowship. By ending his letter with this threefold blessing, Paul reminds the Corinthians—who are a divided and troubled church—that only a deep experience of God’s love can

restore their unity, sustain their peace, and empower their fellowship.

4. Fellowship as the Relational Outcome: The theme of fellowship is emphasized in 2 Corinthians 13:14 as a relational outcome of the Holy Spirit’s work. In this passage, “fellowship” (*koinōnia*) refers to shared participation, a deep relational bond that exists not only between believers and the Spirit but among believers themselves, because of the Spirit’s unifying presence. This closing blessing summarizes the heart of Christian community: the Spirit is the One who creates, and sustains, the unity and relational depth within the church. The Corinthian community, previously marked by divisions and rivalries, is now urged to experience reconciliation and harmony through the fellowship produced by the Spirit.

Paul refers to this theme of Spirit-empowered unity in other places, as well. In Philippians 2:1, 2, he encourages his readers: “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (*ESV*). Similarly, in Romans 15:5, 6, Paul prays, “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*ESV*). Harmony is a relational result of God’s Spirit, fostering mutual love and worship.

In Galatians 5:22–26, Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit as love, peace, and gentleness—all relational qualities essential to community life. Thus, in 2 Corinthians 13:14, Paul isn’t merely offering a general or even customary farewell blessing; he’s casting a vision for what the Spirit makes possible: a reconciled, grace-filled, loving community, bound together in divine fellowship. “Grace, love, and communion are not natural to human beings, but they flow to the church from the members of the Godhead as divine gifts. These were the gifts that could heal the church in Corinth and that would prepare it for the realization of the Christian hope at the return of the Lord.”—“2 Corinthians,” in *Andrews Bible Commentary*, p. 1685.

Part III: Life Application

Discuss with your group the following questions in light of 2 Corinthians 13:11–14:

- 1. In 2 Corinthians 13:11, Paul says, “Aim for restoration” (*ESV*). Why do you think Paul includes this goal as a final exhortation? What might restoration look like in your own relationships or church community?**

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2. How is it possible to “be of one mind” (*1 Cor. 1:10, NLT*) and “live in peace” (*Rom. 12:18, NLT*) in a church such as the church at Corinth, which had so many conflicts (*see 1 Cor. 1:10–13*)?
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3. What role does humility play in fostering unity?
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4. In 2 Corinthians 13:12, believers are told to “greet one another with a holy kiss” (*ESV*). What might be a culturally appropriate way, today, to express this kind of spiritual affection and unity?
-

5. In what ways have you received Christ’s grace recently, and how can your experience influence how you respond to difficult people or situations?
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6. Are there relationships in your spiritual community that need healing or strengthening? If so, what are they? More important, what steps can you take toward facilitating that outcome?
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7. Paul ends his letter with joy, comfort, and peace. Which of these divine gifts do you most need right now, and how might you seek it through God’s presence?
-

Sin shattered Adam and Eve's communion with God, but He did not leave the fallen pair to self-destruct. He first sought them out (*Gen. 3:9, NKJV*) and went on to prophesy about the birth of One who would save the world from sin (*Gen. 3:15*). Right there in Eden after the Fall, prophecy uplifted Jesus and pointed sinners to Him, their only hope.

This quarter's study, entitled *The Gift of Prophecy* by the Ellen G. White Estate, examines God's ingenious innovation for communicating His will and way to fallen human beings who can no longer commune with Him face-to-face.

We will learn how God calls prophets and how we can test their authenticity. We will see the similarities and differences between Old and New Testament prophets, as well as gain a working understanding of how revelation and inspiration functioned in their lives. While some prophets spoke, others wrote; some did both. We will examine these and other modes of divine discourse, their implications, and the blessings of obeying the messages these prophets gave.

Lesson 1—The Creator Speaks

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **Communication in Eden** (*Gen. 2:15–17*)

MONDAY: **Hiding From God** (*Gen. 3:1–8*)

TUESDAY: **God Seeks Humanity** (*Gen. 3:9*)

WEDNESDAY: **Expelled From the Garden** (*Gen. 3:14–24*)

THURSDAY: **God's Spokespeople** (*Heb. 1:1, 2; Rom. 1:19, 20*)

Memory Text—*Hebrews 1:1, 2, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: Sin destroyed the face-to-face relationship that we were intended to have with God. To restore communication with us, He has carefully chosen spokespersons, known as prophets, who reveal His messages to us, often through writings in the Bible but not always.

Lesson 2—The Call of a Prophet

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **Abraham, Defender of the Covenant** (*Gal. 3:6–9*)

MONDAY: **The Elijah Message** (*1 Kings 18:19–39*)

TUESDAY: **Isaiah, the Gospel Prophet** (*Isa. 6:1–8*)

WEDNESDAY: **Daniel, the Faithful Seer** (*Dan. 15:13, 14*)

THURSDAY: **John the Baptist, Preparing a People** (*Mark 1:2–5*)

Memory Text—*Isaiah 6:8, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: Today, the prophetic voice is often rejected or simply ignored. We are called to heed the voice of God's prophets, and to be messengers of the hope given to us through the prophets.

Lessons for People Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision:

Christian Record Services offers the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* free of charge in braille, MP3 disc, and online download to people who are blind, have low vision, or cannot hold or focus on standard ink print. Contact Christian Record Services, PO Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097. Phone: 402-488-0981, option 3; email: services@christianrecord.org; website: www.christianrecord.org.