

1 CORINTHIANS WEEK 1

UNITY



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover picture is Saint Paul by Diego Rodrigues da Silva y Velázquez (1599 – 1660), on display at Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona.

We begin, not with Paul's first letter, but with a key passage from 1 Clement.

But, it turns out that 1 Corinthians isn't Paul's first letter to Corinth anyway. Diving into the intro to what is actually Paul's second letter to Corinth, we find nuggets on gifts and church unity.

We're pleased to provide *the DEEP* studies in PDF format at no charge. We hope you will find them helpful and encouraging as you press on in your journey toward spiritual maturity in the Lord.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. To subscribe to the daily DEEP email, visit our website at www.ailbe.org and click the sign-up button at the bottom.

There, you will also discover many other resources, including many email newsletters, such as our worldview study *ReVision*, our devotional newsletter *Crosfigell*, and *the DEEP*.

We are a spiritual fellowship patterned after the Celtic Revival. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

Thank you.

All the individual weekly study guides are available for download here:

<https://www.ailbe.org/study-category/deep-studies/>

Theology From Scratch — Week 10

Copyright 2026 F. Michael Slay

The Fellowship of Ailbe

www.ailbe.org

All scripture references are noted. ESV stands for the English Standard Version. © Copyright 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved. NKJV stands for the New King James Version. © Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. NIV stands for The Holy Bible, New International Version®. © Copyright 1973 by International Bible Society. Used by permission. All rights reserved. KJV stands for the King James Version.

1 1 Clement 47 (Roberts-Donaldson Translation)

Take up the epistle of the blessed Apostle Paul. What did he write to you at the time when the Gospel first began to be preached? Truly, under the inspiration of the Spirit, he wrote to you concerning himself, and Cephas, and Apollos, because even then parties had been formed among you. But that inclination for one above another entailed less guilt upon you, inasmuch as your partialities were then shown towards apostles, already of high reputation, and towards a man whom they had approved. But now reflect who those are that have perverted you, and lessened the renown of your far-famed brotherly love. It is disgraceful, beloved, yea, highly disgraceful, and unworthy of your Christian profession, that such a thing should be heard of as that the most steadfast and ancient Church of the Corinthians should, on account of one or two persons, engage in sedition against its presbyters. And this rumour has reached not only us, but those also who are unconnected with us; so that, through your infatuation, the name of the Lord is blasphemed, while danger is also brought upon yourselves.

1 Clement is a letter from the church in Rome to the church in Corinth, written near the end of the first century. It is not part of the canon of scripture, as it was not written by a first-generation Christian, but it ranks at the top of non-canonical early Christian writings. So much so that it is included alongside scripture in such key ancient manuscripts as *Codex Alexandrinus* and the *Syriac Version*.

This passage in 1 Clement is why even the most skeptical skeptics concede that 1 Corinthians is authentic. This paragraph references Paul's letter to the church in Corinth and specifically mentions many of its details. That connection, combined with undeniable facts about the origin and date of 1 Clement, clearly establishes the authenticity of 1 Corinthians.

Even just conceding that 1 Corinthians is a real letter written by a real person in the first century is conceding a lot, as 1 Corinthians makes some definitive statements about who saw the resurrected Christ. Thus 1 Corinthians, even just as a letter, lays a cornerstone for the evidence that Jesus rose from the dead.

But 1 Corinthians isn't just a letter from a guy named Paul. It's inspired scripture with deep and timeless lessons to teach us. It is widely understood to have been written by Paul during his three-year stay in Ephesus—around 55AD.

In 55AD, Corinth was a wildly successful cosmopolitan city, maybe too successful. Its problems seem to descend from its pagan, idolatrous lifestyle. Sexual immorality was widespread in Corinth, and that infected the church there. Paul wrote to them in order to correct this shameful behavior.

This is a classic problem with any church. Its members cannot help but be influenced by the culture they are marinated in. The church must strive to uphold God's standards, or else the salt loses its saltiness.

Curiously, 1 Corinthians is not Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. 1 Corinthians 5:9 mentions a prior letter, which is lost to time. It seems that the earlier letter was anything but inspired, as it was apparently misunderstood. That misunderstanding led to no end of problems, including division. This letter appears to be an effort to rectify the mistakes of the earlier letter—at least in part.

2 1 Corinthians 1:1 (ESV)

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

Having seen the risen Lord on the road to Damascus, Paul sees himself as called to be an apostle. Given that apostle means “sent one,” and Paul was certainly sent by Jesus (specifically, to the gentiles), he’s on solid ground in this claim.

Jesus explained Paul’s role in His kingdom to Ananias in Acts 9:15b–16, “*Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.*” (ESV)

Paul gives additional explanation of all this in Romans 11:13 and Ephesians 3:8.

But the most interesting part of this introduction is his co-author (or, more likely, its amanuensis)— *our brother Sosthenes*. Might this beat the same Sosthenes who suffered an epic beatdown in Acts 18:17?

And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this. (ESV)

Though we cannot be certain, the commentators think it is. All the evidence, limited though it is, points in that direction.

If so, then Sosthenes had a spiritual awakening almost as painful as Paul’s. His beatdown came after a group of Jews accused Paul before a Roman tribunal of which Gallio was the proconsul.

But Gallio put an end to this nonsense saying, “*If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things.*” — Acts 18:14b–15 (ESV)

This is what led to Sosthenes’s legendary beating. The “attitude adjustment” he received is not a common evangelistic method, but in this case, it was God’s choice. And note that Sosthenes didn’t merely convert; he became Paul’s close associate and helped pen 1 Corinthians.

God called Sosthenes to Himself. Just as with Paul, his conversion was painful and dramatic, and, just as with Paul, he was called to a major role.

What kind of Christian do you want to be? Do you want to be a major player, with many trials and great impact? Or would you rather live quietly, serving the Lord faithfully in some minor role?

It’s not your call. If Lord means Lord, then it’s up to Him. You can ask for a particular assignment, but you must be prepared to follow His call, wherever that may lead. If you don’t, then He is less than Lord to you. Most of us are afraid that if we really open the door, God might send us to Siberia or something. Conquer that fear!

3 1 Corinthians 1:2–3 (NKJV)

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

While “called to be saints” is the most common translation of the Greek words κλητοῖς ἁγίοις (klay-tois hag-i-ois)—it’s exactly the same in the ESV—the Greek words literally are “called holy.” The NIV says “holy people” instead.

Holy means separate or set apart. This is what Paul means by “saints.” The modern understanding of the word saints is something like “perfect Christians,” which is nice, but not what Paul means here.

Of course, the goal of every Christian is to behave in such a way that people might think of them as a saint in the modern meaning of the word. This has much to do with why Paul wrote this letter in the first place. His readers definitely aren’t there yet.

Being “separate” or “set apart” is important for the Corinthian Church, as they’re in a culture which is about as unchristian as it can be. The worship of Roman gods was part of every aspect of their lives—their government, their festivals, their guilds, and their social clubs.

But it gets worse. Above Corinth stood an acropolis, which included a temple to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. Hundreds of temple prostitutes plied their trade in the temple and in the city below. This was perfectly legal and normal in their society. First-century Roman medicine had nothing to treat the medical consequences of this behavior. Other than pregnancy, it’s doubtful that anyone even understood the causes.

It’s hard for us to imagine living in such an environment, much less imagine trying to preach the gospel in one. One of Paul’s clear objectives in his writing to them was to at least keep this nightmare out of the church. That appears to have been a major focus of that mysterious letter from Paul that predates this one.

The problems the church faces in 21st century America are remarkably parallel to those of first-century Corinth. Pornography now has a dominant influence in our society. Everything seems to revolve around sex, to the point that most folks don’t even associate sex with parenthood.

Our civilization is crumbling. A huge number of seemingly intelligent people are confused about matters of basic biology that have been universally understood throughout history. They are so deceived that their attempts to bring justice and fairness to some people have actually done more to trample rights than to protect them. They desperately need the church to be a beacon of sanity in our insane world.

Thus, we have much to learn from Paul’s advice to the church in Corinth.

Their problems are our problems.

4 1 Corinthians 1:4–9 (ESV)

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

It is easy to read this passage and not notice what it says. When we see the words, “*the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus,*” we generally think of the gift of salvation.

That’s included in what Paul’s talking about here, but it’s not his point. He’s mostly referring to supernatural gifts of the Spirit. That’s what he talking about when he says, “*in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge.*”

Speech and knowledge were the keys to status in first-century Greece. Paul is saying that they have it at supernatural levels. They are “gifts” of the Holy Spirit. It’s easy to miss how significant this is. We’re used to hearing talents described as gifts, but that concept was new back then. The “gift” of the Holy Spirit was introduced in Acts 2:38.

And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (ESV)

The Bible’s first mention of a specific gift-talent might be in Romans 1:11.

For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— (ESV)

However, Paul doesn’t exactly say what he means by “*some spiritual gift*” in that passage. Still, by Romans 12:6, Paul has made this concept of specific spiritual gifts obvious.

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; (ESV)

This is what Paul means by *gift* in this passage, and it’s supposed to stand out. These people need encouragement, and it’s hard to imagine any words more encouraging than, “*so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end.*”

Every Christian is given the Holy Spirit along with some specific gifts—new “talents and abilities.” These can be completely unrelated to the talents and abilities we had prior to conversion. Thus, we often don’t recognize our gifts. Thus, they can end up untapped and undeveloped.

This is pitiful. Great things may be waiting to be discovered. Many Christians think that couldn’t possibly play a significant role in Christ’s kingdom, so they don’t look for great things in themselves.

Stepping out of your comfort zone and taking on a bigger job than you’d like is how you discover gifts.

5 1 Corinthians 1:10–12 (ESV)

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. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."

One of the tricky things about Christianity is that the subject is, in its totality, beyond human comprehension. Therefore, we can't possibly agree on everything.

But some folks have trouble accepting that. They want to make sure that everyone understands "correct" doctrine. Some doctrines are essential to the faith—and those doctrines are worth insisting on—but a great many are the subject of serious, honest debate among scholars.

A good rule to live by in this regard is, "No one has everything right." Anyone who is always ready to argue the finer points of theology needs to check their ego at the door. Even the wisest of Christians simply do not have the brain power to fully understand many holy things.

Thus, even if it turns out that I'm not downright wrong on an issue, it's still a safe bet that my understanding is less than complete. We should all recognize that even in the best of cases, our understanding is like a child's understanding. That seems to be Jesus's point in Matthew 18:2–4.

And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (ESV)

So, even though seeking correct doctrine is a good thing—we should always pursue truth—our pride gets in the way. This leads to division, and that is a stain on the church.

And do not miss the silliness of the examples in Verse 12. "*I follow Apollos.*" "*I follow Cephas.*"

Seriously? They embarrass the church with divisions over things like that?

We're no better. We divide over the smallest things. Always be mindful of the fact that that division is costly, regardless of the topic. We're supposed to be a light to the community. Let it shine.

So, always think twice when considering whether to challenge someone's beliefs. This holds double for public exchanges. Many disagreements are actually misunderstandings or miscommunication.

It's almost always better to chat with someone later than to confront them in public. If a disagreement merits serious debate, it shouldn't be one-on-one. Seek the wisdom of others.

But, above all, be humble.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. How familiar are you with early church history?
2. What's your favorite “wild conversion” story?
3. What aspect of life in America is the most anti-Christian?
4. Do you know your gifts?
5. Have you seen a lot of church division?