

CENTERED ON THE CROSS

SERIES: UNDER THE CROSS



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1 Corinthians 1:1-17

First Message

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How many dog owners do we have here today? I've noticed something about a few of you that is slightly disturbing. We need to talk about it. There can be a tendency for dog owners to start to look like their dogs. Have you ever noticed it?

Here are a few examples, courtesy of Gerrard Gethings (<https://www.gerrardgethings.com/>), who compiled these pictures.

[Shows images of dogs and owners; the last is of Paul and his dog.]

What do you think? Do I have anything to worry about?

Here's why I think this is worth paying attention to. There is a tendency when you live around something to start to look like it. This happens with people who have been married a long time, with friends, and with people who live in a certain culture.

Let's do a quick exercise. I'd like you to think about three words to describe the culture that we live in. Silicon Valley in 2024. These words could be positive or negative. Pick three words to describe the culture of the world we live in.

We want to ask ourselves how many of these words describe us as a community here in this room. It's a simple question that any community of Jesus followers must constantly ask themselves: How much do we look like the world around us?

It's a simple question, but it's not an easy one. Because there are some ways in which we *ought* to look like the world around us, but there are other ways that we definitely *should not* look like the world around us.

One of the things we see the apostles doing in the early church is contextualizing the message of the gospel. They took the message of the gospel and made it make sense within the culture of their day. The apostle Paul

quoted Greek poets. Peter used cultural metaphors to deliver his message. That's contextualization. In certain ways, we ought to look like our culture if we are going to reach it.

The apostles also spoke against conforming to the world. They described worldly behaviors and attitudes that the church needs to avoid to honor God. Those include sexual ethics, leadership styles, orientation toward money, and more. Those are ways we definitely *should not* look like the world around us.

Let's look at the results of our survey of three words to describe the culture of the world we live in.

[survey results]

Here's a list of words to describe our culture. How many of them are true of our church? Would we describe ourselves the same way? Here's the more difficult question: which ones should we emulate? Which ones should we avoid?

Today, we're beginning a series in the book of 1 Corinthians. This book is a letter that the apostle Paul wrote around 55 AD to a very young church who had been following Jesus together for around three years. We will work our way through this letter for this entire academic year, taking a break for the Advent season in December and the Lenten season leading up to Easter.

As we do every year, the pastors and elders gathered together this past January, and a consensus emerged that this would be a great book for us to go through as a church. It deals with some very important themes. At the heart of all those themes is this very question: What does it mean to live contextualized lives without conforming to the culture around us? If the apostle Paul has one main complaint about this church, it's that they look too much like Corinth.

When we look at an overview of the book, we find that Paul addresses roughly 11 topics: division, incest, marriage, food sacrificed to idols, gender roles in worship, abuse of the Lord's supper, spiritual gifts,

resurrection of believers, sharing financial resources, and attitude toward Apollos as a leader.

It's remarkable how many of these issues are relevant today. All of these are incredibly important issues. Maybe the issues of people coming together to worship Jesus as a community are not as different in 2024 as in 55 AD.

That's why we're excited to work through this letter together. As we do every week here, we'll study Scripture to look at how God spoke truth to the original audience in first-century Corinth. Then, we'll apply that as we look for what God has to say to us today.

We'll find that the apostle always brings the subject back to Jesus and the cross. Over and over and over again, in a hundred different ways, the answer is Jesus. We'll unpack that together as we figure out what it looks like to be a community living under the cross.

Greetings

The book of 1 Corinthians begins as most of the letters of the New Testament do, with an introduction and greeting from its author. Greco-Roman letters followed a standard pattern. Just like a letter today might begin with "To Whom It May Concern" and end with "Sincerely", first-century letters had common elements. The greeting was one of them. Let's read it and then make a few observations.

1 Corinthians 1:1-3:

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, ² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our LORD Jesus Christ, both their LORD and ours: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the LORD Jesus Christ.

As was typical for these kinds of letters, this introduction includes a reference to the authors—Paul and Sosthenes—a reference to the recipient—the Church of God in Corinth—and the standard Greco-Roman greeting—grace and peace.

Let's talk about this church Paul was writing to. The city of Corinth was the wealthiest city in Greece. It rivaled Athens for its cultural importance. It was populated by middle-class freedmen, merchants, sailors, and tourists. People went there to improve their lives by

getting smarter or getting richer. In addition, Roman religion was influential, including a temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Earlier references to the city regarded it as a place full of sexual immorality.

You can read how the church was planted in Acts 18. The apostle Paul originally spoke to the local Jews, as was his custom, but quickly moved on to sharing with Gentiles. He wanted to leave the city, but God asked him to stay. He spent 18 months there getting this church established. Paul was like a father to the Corinthian church.

Imagine for a moment that you are the parents of teenagers. You decide that your kids are responsible enough for you to leave them home alone. So you go on an overnight vacation to Lake Tahoe for the weekend.

Once you get there, you're not sure if you told your kids everything they needed to go. So you send a quick text: "Don't forget to lock the doors when you go to bed. Take the dog out every few hours." That makes you feel better, so you go to bed early.

In the morning, you wake up to a few texts on your phone. The first is from one of your kids: "Where's the dog food? Can we have friends over? The smoke alarm went off. I think I might have COVID." The second one is from the neighbor: "I heard some loud music at your house last night. Everything OK?"

You're trying to trust your kids. You're trying to have a nice getaway. But now you must figure out how to respond to everything that's happened.

That's the letter of 1 Corinthians. It was written about three years after Paul left the church. And a few very important things happened in the interim. First, we know that Paul wrote them a letter that has been lost to history. He references that letter in 1 Corinthians 5:9. We also know that the Corinthians wrote a letter in response, asking him some very specific questions. That letter is referenced in 1 Corinthians 7:1 and several other places. Finally, we know that Paul received a report about how things were going in Corinth from a group of people referred to as "Chloe's people." We'll see that reference in a minute in 1 Corinthians 1:11.

Remember: you sent your kids a text; they texted back with some questions; you heard a report from the neighbor. Same three things: Paul wrote them a letter, they wrote him a letter, and Paul heard about some stuff. As we read through this book, it becomes apparent that Paul mostly addresses the report he heard and their

letter. The first six chapters address the things Paul heard about from Chloe. Chapters 7-16 are written in response to the letter they sent him.

The overall tone is one of correction. This church had lost their trust in Paul. They wandered off course. They chose a different path than the one he put them on. That's why in this opening, Paul stresses his role as "an apostle of Christ Jesus, called by the will of God." He rarely refers to his divine call to be an apostle, but he does so here because he wants to stress his authority in their lives. He is still their father. They need to listen to him. He begins by making sure they have their authority clear.

Who is our authority? Who corrects us when we wander off the path?

The answer is simple. Our authority is the written Word of God. This text. The Bible. We believe that this is the clearest revelation of God to his creation and is the only perfect source of authority for how to respond to God and follow Jesus. But as simple as that conviction is, it's often difficult to play out. Many of us read the same words and come to different conclusions. The Bible is not always an easy book to decipher. But we at least need to agree that we have no other authority besides it.

I've changed some of my views over my thirty-plus years of following Jesus, but all those changes come down to the text. The way I originally understood God's revelation gave way to a new understanding after deeper study and reflection. Our goal is never to be swayed by culture, what we want to be true, or what others tell us. The Bible is the only authority for us as a community.

As Paul continues, we see him center his authority in God himself.

Thanksgiving

What becomes clear throughout 1 Corinthians is that this community has over-estimated their maturity. They think they have it all together. Paul has to break it to them that they don't. They aren't as mature as they think they are.

The first thing that becomes obvious is how he gives thanks for them. It's very typical in a Greco-Roman letter for the author to express his thanks for the recipient before moving on to the topics at hand. So, the fact that the next six verses contain a thanksgiving for the Corinthians is not remarkable or noteworthy. What is interesting is what Paul chooses to give thanks for. Let's read how he approaches that.

1 Corinthians 1:4-9:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

How do you authentically give thanks for someone who is really missing the mark? You give thanks for God's work in them. That's what Paul chooses to do.

Notice how he begins: "I give thanks for you because of the grace of God that was given you." Paul continues that same approach. He gives thanks for what God has done, not what the Corinthians have done. Notice the verbs: "that was given you", "you were enriched", "testimony was confirmed", "you are not lacking", "will sustain you", "you were called", and finally "God is faithful."

Most of his gratitude is based on what God has done among them. As one commentator puts it, "he focuses on the faithfulness of God rather than the fickleness of humans." ¹

In particular, he calls out the way God has given them different gifts. That's most likely what he's talking about when he says "the grace that was given you" because the word for "grace" is from the same root as gifts. He also talks about them not lacking any gifts and how they are enriched in him.

In fact, he specifically mentions the two gifts that are getting them into trouble. He talks about "speech" and "knowledge." Those are the Greek words "logos" and "gnosis". These are some of the gifts that Paul will challenge them on. Paul will make the point that they are overusing them and overvaluing them.

In 1 Corinthians 4:20, he will say, "the kingdom of God does not consist in *logos*, but in power." In 1 Corinthians 13:8, he will say that *gnosis* will pass away, but "Love never ends." So even though these are the gifts the Corinthians put too much weight on, he makes it a point to thank God for the way he has given them those gifts.

We recently conducted a team assessment for our church staff, which gave us some insight into how we function and the different gifts we bring to the table. One of my big takeaways was that I tend to skip over the people who have different strengths from me. I don't recognize the importance of what they bring. Sometimes, I'm even annoyed by their gifts because I don't understand why they are necessary.

Paul does something remarkable here: he thanks God for the gifts the Corinthians are overusing in a way that is causing harm. It's like if a friend was hitting you with a whiffle ball bat, and your comment was, "Wow, that company really does make a nice whiffle ball bat."

Paul can do that because it is God who gave them their gifts. Even their misuse of a gift does not change the source of it. This is the reorientation that we will see repeatedly in the book of 1 Corinthians: from focusing on people to focusing on God's work in people.

That's why Paul reminds them of two things: God is faith, and you have to "wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ." That's the trick. We wait for God. We don't rush to judgment. None of us know how any situations in our lives will play out. So, we remind ourselves of God's faithfulness and wait for Christ.

Division

In the last section of our passage this morning, we see one of the big topics of this book. Paul addresses the issue of divisiveness.

1 Corinthians 1:10-17:

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. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.¹² 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."¹³ **Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?** ¹⁴ **I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,** ¹⁵ **so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name.** ¹⁶ **(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)** ¹⁷ **For Christ did not send me to**

baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Unity is the single biggest topic in the book of 1 Corinthians. It receives more attention than the other ten issues Paul wants to address. I think he begins with it because in some ways, this topic underlies all the others. Once you've managed to build some unity, all the other things become easier to talk about.

He starts with an urgent request: "I appeal to you brothers." This is a desperate ask. The way he describes his request reveals what he is really after: "all of you agree," "there be no divisions," "you be united in the same mind and judgment."

Divisions are the issue. Not only do they have different opinions on topics, but they have also formed factions within their community. These particular factions are marked out by allegiance to certain leaders: "I am of Paul" and "I am of Apollos." This is the report that he has heard. These phrases are probably slogans that people were using.

That's not unity. And this kind of unity is nothing less than a stain on the name of Christ. Unity shows up like a golden thread woven throughout the pages of Scripture: the man and the woman becoming one, the oneness of God, the unified kingdom of Israel, and twelve very different disciples who were unified around Jesus. We know that unity is one of the most important themes for God's people.

But what does that unity look like? What do "all of you agree" and "there be no divisions among you" mean?

Unity does not mean uniformity. It can't. That's impossible. There's a phrase we often use in marriage counseling: the goal is to seek "oneness without sameness." That's the goal for communities as well. The trick is in agreeing on what we need to agree on and what is okay to disagree on.

We can imagine various issues as concentric circles. A group of issues in the center define the core of our community. There are other things at various distances from the center where there is a diversity of thought. That's not just a concession: that's good. It's how we form unity.

What does Paul want to be at the center for the Corinthians? What should they agree on so that they

don't have divisions about what they differ on? We don't have a full answer to that question yet—it will unfold throughout the letter. But at the end of this section, he references the power of the cross of Christ. That's the beginning of Paul's attempt to define the core. The community should participate in the death of Christ on the cross and look forward through baptism to his return. That's the core.

You might wonder how that plays out at PBC? It's not that hard to agree on this principle, but it's often more complicated in practice. For us, we have unity of leadership for everything that is spelled out on our "What We Believe" page at pbc.org/what-we-believe. That includes a doctrinal statement about the basic tenets of Christianity, some practices around baptism and membership, and a statement about sexuality and marriage. All the pastors and elders agree with the doctrinal statement and statement on marriage and sexuality. They form the center of our agreed-upon theology around here.

Apart from those core issues, we have a variety of convictions on other topics. There is no agreed-upon theological conviction among the elders or pastors on the role of women in ministry, worship styles, the importance of spiritual disciplines in the Christian life, or cultural issues like vaccines, politics, and how to respond to the marginalized in society. We have a diversity of opinions on those topics and we believe that can be a healthy thing.

Within our community, we have even more variety. You don't have to agree with all the core questions to be a part of us. In fact, we'll welcome you as part of our community no matter what you think or believe. You're free to worship, participate, and serve at various levels. As you move toward more significant leadership roles in the church, you'd be expected to align more on those central issues.

The problem that was happening in the church of Corinth is the same as the problem that has happened in churches for centuries since. They created divisions over issues that they didn't need to divide over.

The antidote that Paul suggests is always to come back to the center. We center on the cross of Christ.

The power of the cross of Christ and the unity that comes through their common baptism—that's it. It really isn't that complicated. We need to rally around our common center. It is not culture. It is not worship style or a particular biblical interpretation or a set of theological principles. Our center is the cross of Christ: the God who became man, was crucified, and resurrected so that the church could be born until the day that he will return and bring in the fullness of the kingdom of God.

That's our core. That's what draws us together.

Conclusion

We started off this morning with pictures of people who looked like their dogs. The same is true of churches that start to look more like their culture than Christ. One of the most prominent ways that we start to look more like our culture than the kingdom of God is not how we talk or what we do on Sunday morning or how we spend our money.

We find unity in the wrong things. We rally around Christian leaders instead of Christ. We elevate Christian ideas to unite us instead of the cross of Christ. We form factions, divide into subgroups, and throw stones at the very people who are closest to us.

I'll end with Jesus himself praying that we overcome this tendency. Listen to John 17:20-21 where Jesus is praying over his disciples just before he died: "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

"That they may all be one." Why? So that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Friends, we need to find our center. We need to wrap our community around the cross of Christ and nothing else. Only then can we represent God well to the world.

Endnotes

1. Craig L. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians (The NIV Application Commentary)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 39.