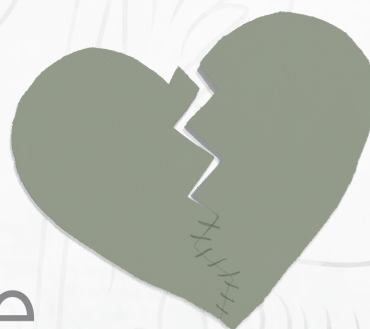


A Bible Study by  
Melissa Spoelstra

# First Corinthians



Living Love  
When We Disagree

Abingdon Women / Nashville

**First Corinthians**  
**Living Love When We Disagree**

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*This book is printed on elemental chlorine-free paper.*

ISBN 978-1-5018-0168-6

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Melissa Spoelstra** is a popular women's conference speaker, Bible teacher, and author who is madly in love with Jesus and passionate about studying God's Word and helping women of all ages to seek Christ and know Him more intimately through serious Bible study. Having a degree in Bible theology, she enjoys teaching God's Word to the body of Christ, traveling to diverse groups and churches across the nation and also to Nairobi, Kenya, for a women's prayer conference. Melissa is the author of the Bible studies *Joseph: The Journey to Forgiveness* and *Jeremiah: Daring to Hope in an Unstable World* and the parenting book *Total Family Makeover: 8 Practical Steps to Making Disciples at Home*. She has published articles in *ParentLife*, *Women's Spectrum*, *Just Between Us*, and the Women of Faith blog. She also writes her own regular blog in which she shares her musings about what God is teaching her on any given day. Melissa lives in Dublin, Ohio, with her pastor husband, Sean, and their four kids: Zach, Abby, Sara, and Rachel.

### Follow Melissa:

Twitter	@MelSpoelstra
Instagram	@Daring2Hope
Facebook	@AuthorMelissaSpoelstra
Her blog	MelissaSpoelstra.com (check here also for event dates and booking information)



# Introduction

**L**iving love when we disagree sounds good on paper, but it isn't easy. We're different—we have different personalities, preferences, and perspectives. And we can struggle to get along, especially when we don't see eye to eye. In the course of a day, we can find ourselves disagreeing or debating with family, friends, coworkers, and even strangers on social media about everything from food choices and parenting styles to politics and religion. Often we find ourselves divided—even as Christians. How can we work out our differences with humility and grace, always showing the love of Christ, while still remaining true to what we believe?

The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the church in Corinth about this very thing, because they were struggling with their own set of issues. Being one of the few churches where both Jews and Gentiles worshiped together, they had different practices and ideas that threatened unity in the church. Their economic and social diversity contributed to the discord, giving them a reputation for conflict. Rather than focusing on Christ as the head of the body, they formed factions based on various church leaders. Worship practices, the role of women, and sensitive issues of conscience were other topics of concern. Paul addressed all of these divisive issues in his letter, which we know today as 1 Corinthians.

Paul urged the church in Corinth to “be of one mind, united in thought and purpose” (1 Corinthians 1:10). He essentially called them to live love—even when they disagreed. Chapter 13, known as the love chapter, wasn't included to be a nice poem for weddings. Instead, it was written to urge Christians living in a pagan and diverse culture to approach one another with the love of Christ. It calls us to do the same.

Regrettably, we often exercise the opposite of that kind of love, choosing instead to keep a record of wrongs or to make rude comments—whether in person or on social media. The truth is, we can never demonstrate this supernatural love and kindness with those who disagree with us apart from Jesus. Paul acknowledged this truth, mentioning the name of Jesus nine times in the first nine verses of this letter alone! He knew that we desperately need Christ at the center of our personal lives, including our interactions with others. Our unity comes only through Christ and His love.

In the next six weeks, we will dive deep into Paul's letter, exploring how we can:

- Deal with our differences in a loving way without compromising our convictions
- Achieve harmony while maintaining our diversity
- Consider the ways that the surrounding culture impacts our beliefs
- Agree to disagree on matters of preference and opinion
- Humbly listen to others with views different than our own
- Embrace ambiguity in some areas, acknowledging that our view is often partial and incomplete
- Demonstrate to all that love is the greatest thing, which never fails

Together we will learn some practical truths we can implement in our relationships in order to live love even when we disagree. We will see that Paul's call to unity isn't a call to compromise our beliefs. Just as he upheld the gospel of Christ while seeking to help the Corinthians apply it to their relationships, we too will discover how we can stand firm on the gospel while finding and focusing on our common ground in Christ.

### Options for Study

Before beginning the study, I invite you to consider the level of commitment your time and life circumstances will allow. I have found that what I put into a Bible study directly correlates to what I get out of it. When I take time to do the homework daily, God's truths sink deeper as I take time to reflect and meditate on what God is teaching me. When I am intentional about gathering with other women to watch videos and have discussion, I find that this helps keep me from falling off the Bible study wagon midway. Also, making a point to memorize verses and dig deeper by looking at additional materials greatly benefits my soul.

At other times, however, I have bitten off more than I can chew. When our faith is new, our children are small, or there are great demands on our time because of difficult circumstances or challenges, we need to be realistic about what we will be able to finish. So this study is designed with options that enable you to tailor it for your particular circumstances and needs.

**1. Basic Study.** The basic study includes five daily readings or lessons. Each lesson combines study of Scripture with personal reflection and application (**green boldface type** indicates write-in-the-book questions and activities), ending with a suggestion for talking with God about what you've learned. On average you will need about twenty to thirty minutes to complete each lesson.

When you gather with your group to review each week's material, you will watch a video, discuss what you are learning, and pray together. I encourage you to discuss the insights you are gaining and how God is working in your own life.

**2. Deeper Study.** If you want an even deeper study, there is a Weekly Wrap-up at the end of each week to guide you in reviewing the chapters and themes covered that week. This will give you a better sense of the flow of the letter, which was designed to be read out loud and passed among the house churches in Corinth. Additionally, Digging Deeper articles are available online (see [www.AbingdonPress.com/FirstCorinthians](http://www.AbingdonPress.com/FirstCorinthians)) for those who would like deeper exploration of the text and themes. Finally, memory verses are provided for each week of study so that you may meditate on and memorize key truths from God's Word.

**3. Lighter Commitment.** If you are in a season of life in which you need a lighter commitment, I encourage you to give yourself permission to do what you can. God will bless your efforts and speak to you through this study at every level of participation.

**Take time now to pray and decide which level of study is right for you, and check it below:**

☐ **1. Basic Study**

☐ **2. Deeper Study**

☐ **3. Lighter Commitment**

Be sure to let someone in your group know which level of study you plan to do so that you have some accountability and encouragement.

Also, I invite you to post some of the insights and experiences you and your group have during the study, using the hashtag #1Corinthians. If a verse or sentence from the study stands out to you, feel free to tweet, Instagram, or Facebook using the hashtag so that we can see what is resonating with you!

## **A Final Word**

As we begin this journey together, keep in mind that the goal is unity in Christ, not uniformity. The body of Christ is made up of unique individuals with different gifts, opinions, and ideologies; and there is strength and beauty in that diversity. Although achieving harmony in the midst of our diversity may be challenging, it is not impossible. God never calls us to do something without equipping us through His Word and His Spirit. With the help of the Spirit of Christ who lives within us, we can learn to deal with our differences in a loving way—even while living in a divided culture. May this powerful truth from 1 Corinthians 13:8 (NIV) both encourage and motivate us: *Love never fails!*



The background of the page features a detailed, light green line drawing of classical architectural elements. It includes several columns with prominent acanthus capitals, which are decorated with large, stylized leaves. The drawing is rendered in a clean, minimalist style with no shading, creating a subtle, elegant backdrop for the text.

**Week 1**

# **IN CHRIST ALONE**

**1 Corinthians 1–2**



## Memory Verse

*I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.*  
(1 Corinthians 1:10)

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## DAY 1: SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

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My pastor husband, Sean, and I host a gathering on the second Sunday of every month. We invite new people who have visited our church so they can ask questions and we can share a little about the church's vision and values. It's an informal time when we try to keep it real by mentioning our weaknesses and past mistakes as a church as well as the exciting things God is doing in our midst.

Imagine you are a visitor checking out the church in Corinth. Here are some of the things you might discover by asking questions at a gathering in the home of a church leader:

- People are identifying with certain preferred leaders and teachers to the extent that factions exist within the local body.
- Members are divided over whether the man in the church who is having an affair with his stepmother is exercising newfound freedom from the law or is in need of church discipline.
- Believers are bringing lawsuits against each other.
- There are differing opinions about marriage, men's and women's roles in the church, and abuses of spiritual gifts.

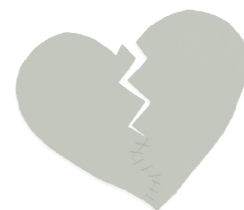
While we might decide to visit the church down the street, the early believers had no such option. They had to learn to work out their differences.

Whether or not they are apparent to everyone, all churches struggle with divisions and difficulties. The church is not only *made up* of sinners but also is *led* by sinners. Until we reach heaven, no perfect body of believers will exist. And sometimes we fight over some of the silliest things!

The Corinthian church had its issues for sure, but our church situations aren't much different. Are there those in your church who are constantly quoting some popular preacher they are enamored with? What about people who disagree about which sins the church should address and which should be left to an individual's conviction of the Holy Spirit? Have disputes ever arisen after two believers saw a business deal fall apart or had different opinions about how a ministry should be run? Though we may not like to admit it, our churches can be just as dysfunctional as the Corinthian body of believers.

## Extra Insight

Corinth was located on an isthmus between two seas, which gave it importance as a commercial center as well as a strategic military position.



## What are some disagreements you've observed in the Christian community of which you are a part?

Some members of the pilot group for this study mentioned disagreements about:

- contemporary worship
- whether to have a choir
- the layout of the church bulletin
- whether the American flag should be on display in the sanctuary
- what the Bible says about salvation, marriage, and other topics

The question isn't whether we will have disagreements in the church but how we will handle these conflicts.

When the local leaders in Corinth weren't sure how to handle some of these conflicts, they wrote a letter to the man who had founded the church. Paul had helped to plant the church while on his second missionary journey when he stayed in Corinth for a year and a half. He began preaching in the Jewish synagogue but ended up gathering more converts from a Gentile audience. Believers came from all socioeconomic classes and included a minority of Jewish converts. While they were united in Christ, their diversity caused many disagreements.

Though we do not have a copy of the original letter, the Book of First Corinthians contains the Apostle Paul's response to questions written about three to five years after the birth of the church. At this time Paul was ministering in the city of Ephesus while attempting to instruct and encourage the believers in Corinth through his writings. Understanding the context of the letter as well as the backdrop of Corinthian culture will help us make sense of those portions that can be difficult for us to understand today. Despite our cultural differences, the issues the early Corinthian believers faced have continued to cause debate and conflict in the church for two thousand years, resulting in disagreements on subjects such as men's and women's roles and the practice of spiritual gifts.

As we study Paul's letter, we'll find a call to quit majoring in the minors. This reminds me of the motto of the Moravian Church, whose roots date back to the fifteenth century: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; and in all things, love."<sup>1</sup> God used Paul as His mouthpiece to help the early church learn to love each other and work toward unity. Sometimes love meant confronting blatant sin, and other times it meant backing down on preference issues that weren't black or white. As we go through a section of the letter each day, we'll be looking for the original meaning as well as the contemporary significance.

Before we get into the text, let's consider a few facts about the city of Corinth:

- Corinth had been a prominent port city that the Romans destroyed in 146 B.C., and it rose again to prominence when Julius Caesar rebuilt the city in 44 B.C.
- At the time of Paul's writing (A.D. 55), the city was about one hundred years old and had a population of around 80,000 with another 20,000 in outlying areas.
- Corinth was a wealthy and multicultural city.
- A major attraction in Corinth was a temple to Aphrodite (the Greek goddess of love) that boasted 1,000 temple prostitutes.
- The Corinthians held strongly the Greek ideals of individualism, equality, freedom, and distrust of authority.<sup>2</sup>

In a nutshell, the rebuilt city of Corinth was a melting pot of cultures with new wealth and an emphasis on intelligence and individualism.

**What modern cities come to mind when you read about Corinth?**


**What parallels do you find between Corinthian culture and our culture?**

Did you think of cities known for their wealth, sin, or proximity to bodies of water? I believe we will find many ways to relate to the believers in Corinth though we are separated by almost two thousand years.

Before Paul addressed any of the Corinthians' questions, he settled the issue of identity. Over and over he repeated the name of Christ.

**Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, holding your place here for today's study. How many times did Paul mention Christ's name?**

Paul began his letter with an emphasis on his personal relationship to Christ and reminded the Corinthians that their source of grace and peace was found in Christ. Two times Paul mentioned the return of Christ to give them an eternal perspective in the midst of their disagreements. Anyone reading just these first nine verses can't help knowing Paul's favorite topic of conversation.



Paul would go on to offer admonishments, instructions, and truths that might be tough to swallow, but he began with encouragement about Christ—knowing that Christ should be the starting point for every discussion and disagreement. Apart from Him we are just blowing smoke with shared ignorance.

Next Paul reminded the Corinthians that God made them holy. The word used here means set apart or different. Then he said that not only the Corinthian believers were holy through Christ, but others were as well.

**Who, specifically, did Paul say are holy in verse 2?**

**If all who call on the name of Christ are made holy, what does that mean you are?**

If you have called on the name of Christ for salvation, then you have been made holy. So many times that is not how I see myself. I feel lazy when I don't get everything done on my to-do list. Discouragement can overtake me for no good reason at all. Sometimes I look to people or possessions for validation. On any given day I can be tempted to find my identity in anything from my pants size to my children's behavior. These last few days I've been in a funk, and I'm not really sure why. Rather than celebrate the wonderful things going on in life, I want to crawl under the covers and stay there. I don't feel holy. Yet Christ says that I am.

So the question for me and you is *which posture will we claim today?* Will we find our identity in

- how we feel,
- what we've accomplished,
- our appearance,
- how others view us,
- or what Christ says about us?

Paul wanted so intensely for the Corinthians to remember their holy identity that he mentioned Christ's name repeatedly. He made it clear that they were set apart and special not because of their wealth, talents, or feelings but because of Christ's death on the cross.

No grades of holiness exist. Some people aren't "kind of holy" and others are "super holy." If you are a believer, then you are holy through the blood of Christ—period. Holiness isn't something we attain. Christ imputed it to us through His sacrifice on the cross. Before we embark any further into a controversial letter with topics that threaten to divide us as believers, let's settle the issue of our shared identity.

While we may disagree on many things within the Christian community, the lens we should view one another through is holiness. We and our brothers and sisters in Christ are holy because Jesus Christ set us apart through His shed blood. He paid the highest price so that we could be called holy. Consider what impact that embracing this identity could have on our words, actions, and prayers toward those with whom we are struggling to get along.

**Consider the disagreements you have observed within the body of Christ. How could seeing ourselves and one another as holy help with conflict resolution? (Answers will vary; there is no one right answer.)**

Paul began his letter to the church at Corinth with a greeting and an emphasis on our shared identity in Christ to set the tone for the sixteen chapters of admonition and encouragement that followed. He also stressed his authority as an apostle because, as we will see, many in the church were rejecting his leadership. How could Paul be so positive about a church full of divisions? He could have let their struggles become a reason to write them off and focus on other churches he had planted that didn't seem as problematic. Instead, he turned his attention to the character of God. He recognized what one commentator has so beautifully expressed: "To delight in God for his working in the lives of others, even in the lives of those with whom one feels compelled to disagree, is sure evidence of one's own awareness of being the recipient of God's mercies."<sup>3</sup>

A common tendency among many Christians today is to find a new faith community when the human flaws of their church are exposed. As we study 1 Corinthians, I pray we will see other believers for who they really are—struggling sinners like us whom Christ has declared holy. Then we will be able to celebrate one another's strengths before beginning to work out our disagreements.

### **Talk with God**

**In the blank below, write the name or first initial of a believer you have disagreed with recently—even if only in your thoughts.**

\_\_\_\_\_ is holy and loved by God through Christ.

Take a moment to pray for this person, asking God to help you see him or her as God does.

## Extra Insight

The very last verse in the Bible reminds us that we can view one another as holy. As the final words of God's revelation to us, John wrote, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's holy people" (Revelation 22:21).

As a follower of Christ, write your name in the blank below:

\_\_\_\_\_ is accepted by God and declared holy because she has called on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. "But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

Write a prayer in the margin thanking God that your identity is not based on your accomplishments, feelings, clothing size, or number of likes on social media. Also thank Him for the cross and your holiness found in Christ alone.

## DAY 2: DEALING WITH DIVISIONS

Of course, there are going to be times when we disagree with one another as Christians. However, the manner in which we disagree gives the watching world a glimpse of how followers of Jesus are interacting, and often it's not a good picture—especially when our viewpoints don't align on anything from the exposed sins of a prominent Christian leader to our interpretations of a particular passage of Scripture.

Online I read hateful words, witness name calling, and watch Scripture bullies use God's Word as a weapon against fellow believers. The Bible is a sword, but we are called to wield it against our common enemy, Satan, not each other. Through this letter to the church in Corinth, Paul models the need to address conflicts with the recipe for healing divisions among us. Whether we are sparring online, via text, over the phone, or face to face, Paul teaches us that God asks us to strive for unity, especially in the midst of our disagreements.

We don't have to conform and be cookie cutter Christians who agree on every minute point of doctrine. Of course, theology matters. Paul wasn't propagating an "anything goes" attitude toward the Scriptures. On the contrary, his letter sought to help realign the Corinthians in areas where they strayed from sound teaching, resulting in divisions. The key to finding resolution is in separating preferences from absolutes. Many times we squabble over minutia and miss the big picture.

Today we're going to look at two specific dangers Paul addressed that can lead to divisions.

### 1. Relational Idolatry

The first danger Paul addressed is relational idolatry. Anything that captures our attention more than God can become an idol, including people. And often the result is divisive allegiances.