

Our Firm Foundation

A Weekly Study of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

Orchard Park Wesleyan Church

Day 1: Introduction and Background

"After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth." Acts 18:1

When Pastor Dan mentioned writing another devotional to accompany a sermon series, I was *thrilled*. I'll admit that I thought this might be a little easier compared to writing studies for Leviticus because I was more familiar with so much of 1 Corinthians. On the other hand, I was a little nervous about finding enough to write about to take us through five days each week. Well, I'm humbled and happy to be wrong on both counts. And I'm thankful that God, as always, shows Himself and His Word to be infinitely more than my human mind estimates—even when I think I estimate big.

As I started studying 1 Corinthians for this devotional, I found God leading me to a few significant and overarching understandings. We'll see many of these themes play out in the weeks to come, and I'd like to point them out now so that we can watch for them each week as God might bring them to light for you, even if I don't mention a particular instance that I find.

1. **God's Word is perfectly complete.** I found myself amazed at how many times 1 Corinthians directly related to Leviticus and how it is echoed in many other places in scripture. In particular, I loved seeing how often God's holiness is emphasized throughout all of His Word. One of the themes we'll study in this book is God's call to holiness for His people, specifically as we relate to the unsaved world around us.

2. **God's Word is timeless.** The reality and relevance of what Paul was dealing with in the Corinthian church is amazing. Not only are many of the issues the same ones we face today, but the culture and society were very similar to our own. I felt God really impressing many of the similarities in struggle, culture, society, sin issues, etc., on my heart, and I don't think it's any coincidence that He led Pastor Dan to this sermon series now. God's Word tells us that the closer we get to Christ's return, the more we'll see depravity in the world around us and confusion in the church as a whole—and Paul's letter addresses issues pertinent to this truth.

3. **Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, God calls us to loosen our grip on this world and firmly set our focus—with eyes, mind, and heart—on Him and His Kingdom above.** This is a running theme throughout 1 Corinthians, and it's the biggest point that God's been talking with me about throughout my reading and writing. At the heart of every issue that we'll see in the Corinthian church is the question of where their (and let's personalize this to *our*) focus is centered. What is more important: our "rights" or Christ and His Kingdom? If we are to be people who affect this planet for God's Kingdom, the treasure of our heart has to be *above*. It's not easy; our human nature wars against it. But it is the truth. We'll see this point crescendo as Paul talks about Christ's return in the later portion of the book.

Now that we have a broad scope of the themes in our study, let's start this together.

Lord, lead us where You want us to go; open our hearts and minds to what You have to say individually and as a church. Deepen our love for You; fill us up with love for You; and then increase our capacity for more. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

The Times, Geography, and Culture in Corinth

Please read Acts 18:1-16.

History was never my passion. Throughout high school and college, I was routinely bored with anything that smelled of history, archaeology, and especially geography. My aptitude for geography still shines through on family hikes; I definitely don't trust myself to lead my kids on a path through the woods and come out where we should. I leave that to Todd or my brother!

But isn't it funny how God works? As He's called me deeper into His Word, He has also begun to impress upon me the importance of those minutiae that threatened to lull me to sleep more than once in school. While many of you are likely leagues ahead of me in your love of history and its importance, let me say, for those of you who may feel the way I did, that this *is important - and it really can be interesting!*

Only when we take into account the historical (and yes, even geographical) background for all of God's Word—and maybe even more for Corinthians—can we truly understand the issues and struggles that persisted in the Corinthian church and compelled Paul to write this letter. This context increases our capacity for real understanding, and since real understanding always penetrates deeper than surface level, we can expect God to speak to our hearts even in these details.

Today, we'll draw a few insights about ancient Corinth from Acts 18 and some other historical sources; we'll refer back to Acts 18 tomorrow as we discover more about Paul's relationship to the church in Corinth and the circumstances that prompted Paul to write this letter.

The city of Corinth was advantageously situated on a terrace at the southern gate of the 4.5-mile isthmus that connected mainland Greece with the Peloponnesian peninsula. Although historically Greek, the Corinth of Paul's day was a Roman colony. It was established as such by Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., after lying dormant for about 100 years following its destruction by the Romans in 146 B.C. The Romans rebuilt the city, and Corinth quickly flourished again.

In Acts 18, we read about Paul's first trip to Corinth—his last major stop on his second missionary journey.

- Whom did Paul meet when he came into Corinth?
- Why had they settled there?
- To whom did Paul first preach in Corinth?

Acts 18 gives us insight (as do other historical writings) into the cultural makeup of Corinth in Paul's day. Paul met Aquila and his wife, Priscilla, both Jews who had fled from Rome sometime after Claudius's mandate for such. This, combined with the fact that Paul first started "testifying to the Jews that the Christ

was Jesus,” and, after the Jews had rejected him and his gospel, he had moved next door to the Jewish synagogue, shows a great *Jewish presence in a Roman colony with Greek roots*. Talk about a melting pot! Furthermore, its strategic location resulted in great opportunity for financial success in Corinth, bringing many people from both the western and eastern hemispheres to settle in the city. *Corinth was the central point of convergence for a great diversity of cultures and religions that were woven into everyday life, government, and society.*

As a port city with a booming population, great diversity, and commercial prosperity, Corinth naturally also grew in its potential for sin and vice. Social and economic snobbery, proud arguments, idolatry, and sexual sin are some behaviors that proliferated throughout the Corinthian church and are addressed in Paul’s letter. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Gordon Fee asserts that “Paul’s Corinth was at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world,” and that “the scattered pieces of evidence from Acts, 1 Corinthians, and Romans suggest that the church was in many ways a mirror of the city.” It was into this setting that Paul first brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and it was to this church that Paul wrote his letter of 1 Corinthians. This is where we’ll pick up tomorrow.

Consider: *What is American society like today? The culture in just our town? What are some similarities and differences between what we have as common struggles or advantages in our current culture versus the ancient Corinthians? Why is this something valuable to consider?*

Pray: *Ask God to begin to show you what He wants to reveal to you personally through this study. Give Him a heart open to conviction if necessary. Ask Him to open your eyes to the world around you, to give you insight into how He wants your life to reflect Him in it.*

Day 2: The Corinthian Church

“I am writing to God’s church in Corinth, to you who have been called by God to be his own holy people. He made you holy by means of Christ Jesus, just as he did for all people everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.”

1 Corinthians 1:2

Yesterday, we came to an understanding of some of what helped shape the culture into which Paul brought the Gospel. Today, we’ll try to gain a little insight into Paul’s relationship with the Corinthian believers and why he thought it necessary to send them this letter.

First Corinthians is a disciplinary letter that Paul wrote to address some major issues that existed within the church he founded. The tone is nothing if not fiercely correctional. We’re not studying a gentle letter of suggestions; we’re reading a caustic, sometimes sarcastic rebuke written to a church that opened its doors to sin and embraced a worldly lifestyle with pride.

If we refer back to Acts 18:8-11, we see the beginning of the Corinthian church. God had His hand mightily on Paul’s evangelism, even confirming to him in a vision that “many in this city belong to me.” Paul spent more than a year-and-a-half building Christ’s church and teaching in Corinth.

Please read 1 Corinthians 1:1-3.

- By whom was Paul chosen? _____
- To what was Paul called? _____
- Fill in the blanks: “I am writing to _____ church in Corinth, to you who have been _____ by

_____ to be his own holy people...”

- According to verse 2, how does Paul identify the Corinthian church?

Our scripture today is a short paragraph, but it’s rich and provides good context for the rest of the week—and really for all of the coming weeks. From these first two verses, we can gain some insight into just how seriously Paul took his own calling and how seriously he deemed the calling of every person who belongs to Christ.

Paul knew who he was in Christ. He confidently asserts that God Himself willed and called him to be an apostle of Christ. With that calling and Paul’s understanding of it will come the authoritative correction in the subsequent chapters, with an especially caustic taking-to-task on the Corinthians’ arrogant rejection of his authority. Paul could discipline and correct this church because his authority came directly from God in his apostolic calling. He knew it, and he followed through with it.

Similarly, Paul understood what it meant for every believer in Christ (in this case, the Corinthian church in particular) to be a part of God’s called and chosen people. First and foremost, every believer is called into *God’s* church and is sanctified in Christ. If we take this to heart, we immediately have to believe that our identity is not just our own; it is joined with God Himself as part of His church, and our claim to holiness will be through Christ—not ourselves.

It is also important to note that *every* believer is called to this process of sanctification and holiness, not just a select few. This is essential to our study of 1 Corinthians because, as we’ll see in weeks to come, many Christian Corinthians were clinging to their “right” to behave however they wanted to behave. This issue of retaining control versus surrendering to Christ’s authority and His plan is of paramount importance in our walk with the Lord. If we scrape and claw to hold on to some bit of control instead of surrendering ourselves fully to Him, we’ll remain in a state of spiritual infancy and stagnation—and we’ll miss out on all of the blessings that come in that growth we resist.

Please read 1 Corinthians 1:4-7.

If we just glance ahead for a moment at chapter 3, we’ll find confirmation of what we likely already know—that Paul felt a deep responsibility for the spiritual growth of the church he helped build and that he loved them as children in the faith. He cared for them as a spiritual father, sensitive to their inability to even consume more than spiritual “milk” when they first came to the Lord. Like any father, Paul expected his children to respond to his training by exhibiting growth and maturity. This is the reason for 1 Corinthians. The church wasn’t growing; it was careening off-track.

There is a general agreement that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians sometime in the spring of AD 53, 54, or 55, near the end of his stay in Ephesus. This puts his writing of 1 Corinthians anywhere from one to four years after his stay in Corinth. Within this short time, Paul received reports that things weren’t going well. In fact, if we glance ahead at 1 Corinthians 5:9, we find that this isn’t even Paul’s first letter to this church. There were some previous indications (whatever they may have been) that the church was moving away from sound doctrine and behavior, prompting Paul to write them prior to 1 Corinthians, even addressing some of the same issues that we’ll see him take head-on in this letter. Even more interesting is the fact that the Corinthians had apparently responded to Paul’s first letter with a letter of their own (7:1) in which, it would appear, they assert their position on a number of issues, many of which seem to contradict the teaching of their founder and threaten the truth of the Gospel. Paul’s letter in 1 Corinthians then, is his response to their letter and an attempt to dismantle bad doctrine, correct their errors, and set the church back on the right course.

Nevertheless, by the time Paul did pen 1 Corinthians, the church was ripe with arrogance, division, and quarreling. Sexual sin was a problem; social snobbery had become commonplace; even remnants of paganism had infiltrated the church. And in the midst of all this that we would readily call sin, the Corinthian church stood proudly claiming these behaviors as their “rights” as those who were free in Christ.

We may look on the Corinthian church and think, *Wow, they were way off the mark. How could they ever have let such rampant sin proliferate throughout the church?!* But God really pressed this on me as I worked on this portion of our study: Not one of us is above this. My intention is not to cause fear because, when we're in Christ, we have no reason to live lives of fear. However, we do need to be wise and guard ourselves against such things. We see example after example of godly people in God's Word who fell to sin; we read countless warnings throughout the New Testament to be on guard against false teachers. And we're told in 2 Timothy that deception and peoples' desire for easy teaching will increase as the last days approach.

The Corinthian church was pretty far off course by the time Paul wrote this letter, but I would venture to say that this level of departure didn't happen overnight, though it certainly spread quickly. That which takes us off course is not always obvious and forthright. Our enemy "is a liar and the father of lies," and he "prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour." Such a predator sneaks in on the heels of truth but veers off course just slightly, so we hardly notice the difference if we're not paying attention.

In this case, the Corinthian church claimed freedom in Christ. That was and is truth! But the lie that crept in behind the truth was that freedom in Christ justified worldly choices and associations. The result was an intense case of worldliness within Christ's church in Corinth. We'll see evidence of this tomorrow, but for now, heed this case as a sobering reminder to each of us that we must stay on guard against the schemes of the enemy.

Consider: What are some areas of your life that are particularly vulnerable to temptation? Why? How do you safeguard yourself in these particular areas?

Pray: Thank God for the examples and warnings He gives to us for our benefit in scripture. Ask Him to expose any areas of weakness in your life, and ask Him to protect you there. Ask Him to help you regularly put on his full armor so that you can stand strong.

Day 3: Division and Worldliness

"For you are still controlled by your sinful nature. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn't that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren't you living like people of the world?"

1 Corinthians 3:3

Today we're going to shift from the history of Corinth and the Corinthian church to the actual body of Paul's letter. We'll be overlapping some of our readings between these two days, primarily because tomorrow, we'll focus on the same basic issue but from a more solution-oriented angle to the problem we'll see today: division in the church.

Let's keep in mind that Paul wrote this letter to the whole Corinthian church; the problems we'll see him argue against are pervasive. And, as we consider division within this church today, I think it's important to note, as one commentator does, that in addition to the church's division into factions, each proudly following its preferred leader, there also existed a rift—a division—between the church as a whole and its founder. This is evidenced by the fact that 1 Corinthians was written, as we learned yesterday, in response to the Corinthians' letter to Paul in which they seemed to assert some critical deviations from Paul's gospel. It is also supported by Paul's vehement defense of his authority as an apostle of Christ in chapter 4. Paul asserts that his calling is the direct result of God's will, and he therefore stands in right authority to discipline and correct the church. Their pulling away from him, dividing from right doctrine, and arguing against Paul's theology in their written response to him created a ripe environment for pride and bickering, symptoms of a church living in the flesh.

Please read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 and 3:1-8.

These “quarrels,” as reported by Chloe’s people, had obviously done some damage within the church, as quarreling within any church always does. The Corinthian church had split into factions, each boasting over its choice (3:21). Pride was a problem, and fighting was the result.

Please read James 4:1-12.

- According to James, what causes quarreling and fighting? (v. 1)
- According to 1 Corinthians 3:3, what does quarreling and jealousy prove?

Division and fighting are manifestations of worldliness; they are indicative of a heart divided in its allegiance to self and God. Notice that I’m not saying that this heart is divided in its allegiance to self *or* God. The Greek word used in James 4:8 is *dipsuchos*, which means “double-minded, wavering.” *HELPS word studies* uses the term “double-minded,” i.e. a person ‘split in half,’ vacillating like a ‘spiritual schizophrenic.’” Division makes a person’s heart fickle; there’s no predictability, no final choice to be made. A heart divided between self *and* God is in a constant state of wavering, shifting focus from God to self and its own “evil desires.” That person—or church—because of its self-focus and the resulting behaviors like quarreling, is indistinguishable from the rest of the world.

- Look up John 15:19. Where has Christ called His people?

Scripture is full of instances where God reminds His people to be separate from the world or institutes safeguards for them against worldliness. We studied this in Leviticus back in the spring. God called His people to be different, holy, like Him. When we choose the world’s ways instead of God’s, the result is disastrous. We are left disarmed, distracted, and ineffective—not because God cannot overcome our sin but because we take our focus off of Him and redirect it to our own arguments and selfishness. This self-focus renders us a prime target for the enemy and opens us up to the infiltration of bad doctrine because we’re not wholly focused on Christ and His truth. Lies can creep in undetected from the world around us because, quite simply, we’re not watching out for them and to some extent in our worldliness have even welcomed them in. Our theology then begins to conform to our desires rather than changing, shaping, and growing us—and affecting the world around us.

In this worldly state, the person (or church) is not just vulnerable and ineffective; it’s something worse.

- What does James 4:4 say we are when we trade our devotion to God for an affinity for the world?

No wonder division in the church was the first problem about which Paul confronted the Corinthians. Division is dangerous! But thankfully, as we’ll see tomorrow, we have Christ as our hope to prevail against it.

Consider: Selfishness runs deep. Our needs, desires, and passions are built into us by our Creator. But needs or desires left unmet (ultimately in Christ) can quickly turn to selfish desire, creating division in our hearts, leading to temptation and sin. Are there needs in your life that you need to bring before God for Him to meet? Psalm 81:10 says, “Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it with good things.”

Pray: Lay whatever you have—praise, sin, need—at the foot of God’s throne. Confess any selfishness or division in your heart, and ask Him to anchor you to Himself. And ask Him to fill your mouth with good things.

Day 4: Unity in Christ

“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

May I just admit to you that it’s been quite a task to portion out and move through these chapters in a logical way? This letter flows so beautifully (however caustic it may be) from one topic to another and then loops right back around. So bear with me as I ask you to jump back to the first several verses of 1 Corinthians chapter 1 again...and then again over to chapter 3...and finally to chapter two for a preview of where we’ll spend all of next week. Phew!

We’ve uncovered some of why division was and is such a serious problem within a church and within an individual heart. Thankfully, God has provided a way for us to escape such trouble.

Please read 1:1-9 again.

Before Paul even addresses the problem of division within the Corinthian church, he sets them up for the solution.

I asked you to fill in the blanks for this same verse back on Day 2. Today, I’m asking you again...but with different blank spaces :

- “I am writing to _____ in Corinth, to you who have been called by God to be His own holy people. He made you holy by means of Christ Jesus, just as he did for _____ people _____ who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, _____ Lord and _____.” (verse 2)
- To what were the believers called, according to verse 9?

Right from the get-go, Paul addresses the Corinthian church according to its true identity as people united in Christ. Not only are they united as the *Corinthian* church, but they are united in Christ with all believers everywhere—Paul included—which is important since we’ve already talked about the fact that there was tension between the church as a whole and their founder. So as he moves to confront the divisions within the church, Paul has already reminded them of who they really are in Christ.

I just want to quickly point out the love in this method of confrontation. This is how God approaches us, and it’s important to be able to recognize this as His method of confrontation and conviction. Recognizing this helps us to distinguish between the guilt and shame that the enemy heaps on us compared to the loving (but not always easy) conviction we receive from the Holy Spirit.

If we have sin in our lives, God doesn’t leave us there. However, He also doesn’t come at us with crushing guilt and shame, pointing out all our flaws. He reminds us of who we are in Him and how much He loves us. Then He convicts us of the sin we have that separates us from Him and is preventing us from living as we truly are in Christ. Yes, this should come with humility and sorrow, but it is distinguishable from the enemy’s tactics that always try to keep us down because God’s aim is always to help us get back up. This is a lesson that I’ve been learning as one who has struggled with guilt from a really young age. I’m still practicing, but God is faithful and patient, and if He can bring me to recognize conviction versus condemnation—and to actually have trust and peace with His conviction—He can certainly do the same for any of you who struggle with the same.

Back to our main topic: After Paul reminds the church of their calling to fellowship and unity in Christ, he launches into confrontation mode. We’ve already established some understanding of why division within a church is such a serious matter; now let’s see what unity in Christ looks like and why it’s important; tomorrow, we’ll discuss the danger in identifying our faith with the teachings of others and how to have a

healthy relationship with our leaders.

Early in his argument against their behavior, Paul calls the church to come to a correct standing. Read our verse for the day above. Easy, right? Just agree on everything and think the same way. Thankfully, I don't think that's what Paul means. So what exactly does he mean when he calls the Corinthian church to "be united in the same mind?" I believe we find the answer at the end of chapter two. **Please read 2:16.**

When we have a relationship with Christ, we have an enormous privilege: we share the very mind of Christ. Though it's a straightforward statement, I wondered to myself, *what does it really mean to have the mind of Christ?* Let's search a little and be encouraged together.

Read John 15:16 and Psalm 25:8-9, 14.

When we follow Christ by obeying His commands, we become His friends, privy to all that He has from the Father. And in our humble obedience, God teaches us His ways and reveals deep things. The KJV says, in Psalm 25:14, that "The *secret* of the LORD is with them that fear him..." (emphasis mine). Those things that the world cannot understand are indeed freely opened up to us because, according to Romans 8:9 and 1 Corinthians 6:17, we have the Spirit of Christ living within us—and even as one with our own spirit. This level of intimacy, spirit to Spirit, is what enables us to understand what God "reveal[s] to us through the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:10) and is in essence what it means to have the mind of Christ; *we understand the things of God that the world cannot.*

This, then, begs the question: how do we discern what the Spirit is saying within us? We know that feelings cannot be trusted as truth, so how does the person who has the Spirit understand the Spirit as He reveals spiritual things?

We'll likely dive into much more about the Holy Spirit and who He is in a few weeks, but for now, I think it is sufficient to understand that the Spirit of God cannot be separated from the Word of God. In order for us to embrace this like-mindedness with Christ and understand those things of the Spirit, we cannot be out of His Word. Psalm 119 is a beautiful example of a fervent love for God's Word and how, when we love His Word, God will give us wisdom and understanding of His Word.

Being in the Word is a discipline and a practice that keeps us abiding in truth and strengthens our walk in the Spirit, thereby helping to guard us from worldliness and the quarreling and division that come along with it. Our hearts and minds are appropriately fixed on God's Word—on Christ Himself—as our foundation, and when we are fully fixed on Him, our hearts work in a state of wholeness, not division. We will not stray into a double allegiance, wavering between God and self, causing division and quarreling because the heart that is fixed on God is always a heart displaying humility and filled with God's love—not its own selfish desires—and so a humble submission to others is the ensuing response.

Consider the richness of blessing God gives us when we belong to Christ. Not only do we have His Spirit; we have understanding of the things of God and access to all that Christ has from the Father.

Pray: Thank God that, as always, He gives us so much more than we could ask or imagine. He sent His Son to save us and give us eternal life. As if that wasn't more than enough, He shares Himself with us intimately.

Day 5: Only One Foundation

“For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ.”

1 Corinthians 3:11

We’ve been talking about division and unity and what those concepts look like when brought to light in the lives of individual people or in the whole body of Christ. Today, we’ll glance at one more argument Paul makes for unity. We’ll look at the danger inherent in defining our faith according to the teaching of a particular person; and we’ll seek an understanding of what it means to have a healthy relationship with our teachers.

Please re-read 1 Corinthians 3:5-23.

Back in this time period—and particularly in this region of the world—society placed great importance on reason, rhetoric, and wisdom.

While there is certainly nothing wrong with intellectual gifting (even Paul makes mention of it in 1:5 as a good thing within the Corinthian church), a problem arose in the church at Corinth because many gave special preference to those teachers who exhibited such skills.

Apollos, in particular, was a solid teacher of the true Gospel who ended up favored over and above Paul by some within the Corinthian church because of his intellectual and rhetorical giftedness; and while the Corinthians were right to welcome his teaching because it aligned with the Gospel of Christ (and therefore with what they had been raised by Paul to believe), they were wrong to exalt him over and above any another, arrogantly identifying with him as the one who defined their faith.

Paul, in his letter, takes the church to task for their arrogance in this matter, and he uses their logic and reason to debunk their silly division into factions. His point is simple: Unity in Christ makes sense; division does not. Unity is wisdom; division is foolishness. When we follow Christ and are learning from His servants who preach the correct gospel, we are foolish to exalt one over another because they (and we) serve the same Master! That Master, God, hands out different parts of the same mission. He assigns the task and equips His servants with the necessary gifts to capably complete it.

Furthermore, how can we brag about someone whom God has given us for our benefit? We can’t brag about a gift that God has given—and this includes people given for our growth and encouragement. We can thank God and cherish the gift, but we can’t boast in that which was given. This is illustrated beautifully in verse 23.

Let’s keep moving.

Please read John 1:42, Luke 22:54-62, and John 21:15-17.

This is a pretty wide-angle view of Peter’s time with Christ. In our readings, we see his calling and renaming, skip over much of his training and walk with Christ in His earthly ministry, catch up with him as he denied his Lord, and finish with a glimpse of his reinstated fellowship with Christ and calling to future ministry.

Peter was chosen by Christ to be the rock upon which Christ would build His church. He was not superhuman or sinless by any stretch. I love that Christ knew exactly what was in Peter that would make him the right one to head up His church and ministry to the Jews. I love that Christ knew that Peter would fall and deny ever having known Him, yet chose him anyway and worked even his failure for good as He instructed Peter to strengthen his brothers (and really all believers going forward) after he returned to Christ. Peter was called to what we would readily call a high position of leadership, yet he was allowed to fall to a very low point in sin.

Matthew 23:8-10 tells us that we are all equal as brothers and sisters and have “only one teacher, the Messiah.” Not one of us is above another but are, in truth, all sinners, even when called to teach. We all

struggle and stumble.

Our human tendency is to want to latch on to someone we deem worthy to lead us, and often, this desire is misplaced onto another *person*. The truth is, the only One worthy of such high honor is our One Teacher. We tread on dangerous ground when we put our faith in fallible men and women rather than in Christ Jesus. Even when the teachers are godly people, they are first and foremost, still people. They are subject to temptation and sin, and to place them on any pedestal is to rob them of the grace that comes with recognizing their humanity.

Secondly, even though the Corinthians seemed to split into factions aligned with good, solid teachers, devotion given to anyone but Christ as the head of the body breeds pride and jealousy.

Then how *should* we relate to those God appoints to lead and shepherd His flock? Let's see what God's Word says on the matter. Please look up the following verses and answer the questions.

- James 3:1—Why shouldn't many become teachers?
- 1 Timothy 3:2—What is the main qualification for the life of one who is a leader in God's church?
List a few other specifics as detailed in the subsequent verses.
- 1 Peter 5:3—How ought leaders in the church live?
- 1 Peter 5:5—How are those younger (likely in spiritual maturity) members of the church to treat the elders?

The short answer to my question above is that we should exercise humility, discernment, and grace with those God calls to positions of leadership. If we are all equal as brothers and sisters, yet some are called to lead God's people and will be judged more strictly because of that calling; if our leaders are people like us and therefore vulnerable to temptation and sin, yet called to live as examples to the flock of God; then our leadership needs all of the above *and* constant prayer.

So while we certainly should never latch on to one teacher as one who defines our faith, we need to treat those who serve the Lord in their calling to leadership with grace and humility. I want to stress, though, that this doesn't mean that we blindly follow. God gives many warnings in scripture against false teachers; even good teachers sometimes make a plain old mistake! So guard your hearts and minds, and test everything (1 Thess. 5:20)—but do so with a spirit of love and respect.

Consider the spiritual leaders in your life right now. A varied mix of teachers is a healthy thing, helping guard us from following any one too closely.

Pray for those you know who are in a position of leadership. Pray that God will guard them from falling, for wisdom and insight, and for hearts that remain sensitive to God's Spirit and His leading. If you find yourself having just one teacher or leader you identify with or follow, ask God to bring other approved workers into your life.

Jennifer L. Skinner