



# The Church at Corinth

## *God Works Through Us*

### About the Story

Today's story continues our following of Paul's missionary work throughout the Mediterranean region. Today we encounter Paul as he spent time developing the church—or, more likely, several small groups of believers in home-church settings—in the diverse, urban port city of Corinth. It may be this diversity of believers that leads to some of these conflict situations.

### The Point:

**We are united together by the power of God in Jesus Christ.** Living out God's kingdom involves living in community with other Christians. This can lead to quarrels and disagreements, like those faced by the church in Corinth. With God's help and Christ's example, the church can face these challenges with faith centered on Jesus Christ.

Let's take a peek at Paul's mail. As we read this correspondence, we see how it is reflective of the time in which it was written as well as how it applies to the church today. Paul's letter to the Corinthians is in response to a letter of questions from them, including Chloe's report that there has been quarreling within the congregation. The question topics run the gamut: leadership, spirituality and physicality, relationships, and responsibility for one another.

In the midst of these questions, conflict and quarreling have arisen. Some of the Corinthians wanted to solve their problems by using their intellect while others wanted to rely on tradition. Some wanted to know what Paul thinks, others believe Apollos had all the answers, and still others just want to follow Jesus. "Who is in charge? How do we know if this is what God really wants from us? And which of us is right?" The topics that the Corinthians were experiencing are ones that most of us have dealt with in our own churches.

In his response, Paul tried to remind them of their unity with one another through their relationship with Christ. He saw that the disagreements were causing division and emphasizes their shared belief and shared goals. He did not state it lightly, but rather with force: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." (1:10) Paul also reminded them that their faith is not based on his teachings, but on their experience of the crucified and risen Christ. Paul knew he was an imperfect reflection of Christ's teaching, and reminded the Corinthians to center their belief on Christ and not on Christ's fallible disciples.

In this story, we see the people of the early church dealing with a very real and modern problem: organizational conflict. The church today is often a place of conflict, both within its walls and with the world. It can be difficult, frustrating, and discouraging to discover that we disagree with

our friends over faith issues we hold so dearly. At times, it can feel like the very core of our belief system is being challenged. How do we as followers of Jesus deal with these conflicts without destroying the unity that holds the church together?

### Last Week/ Next Week

Last week, Paul ministered to the church in Thessalonica. This week, Paul continues his missionary work in Corinth, helping to heal divisions in the community. In next week's lesson Paul describes the exact opposite of division and quarreling from today's lesson as he describes self-giving love.

### Opening Prayer

God of reconciliation, you worked through Paul and the members of the church of Corinth to heal deep divisions, binding the community together on the Gospel of your Son, Jesus Christ. Work in us to heal the divisions in our lives and help us to always remember to center our relationships with one another in the renewing and unending love of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

### Into the Story

The Holy Spirit continues to develop disciples and grow the church, but today conflict enters the story. Conflict is really about relationships. How do you deal with conflict in your life? Do you fear conflict, or thrive on the changes it can bring? Go around the room and discuss your answers.

### Learning the Story

*Paul arrives in Corinth and partners with Aquila and Priscilla in tent making. He also begins speaking in the synagogue about Jesus Christ. In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul encourages agreement and unity as he proclaims the gospel.*

### **Read Acts 18:1-4 – Aquila and Priscilla**

- 🔗 Spouses Aquila and Priscilla were tentmakers by trade, just like Paul. They were also missionaries. How do you balance your call to spread the gospel to all people with the practical reality of holding a job?
- 🔗 Aquila and Priscilla are mentioned a few times in the Bible. If you have time, look up the other times they are mentioned: Acts 18:1-26, Romans 16:3, 1 Corinthians 16:19, and 2 Timothy 4:19. What do you make of these important witnesses to the faith? Does it surprise you to see Priscilla, a woman, have such an active role preaching and teaching in the early church?

### **Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 – Addressing the Divisions of the Church**

- 🔗 If you have time, read the salutation in verses 1:1-9. What do you make of Paul's elaborate introductions and greetings in his letters?

- ❓ The Corinthians were primarily Gentile believers. What types of things were they disagreeing about? How might this list have been different for the believers who were Jewish converts?
- ❓ What makes disagreeing with one another so painful? Is it more difficult when the arguments happen in church? How can we make sure that our decisions and conversations are centered on God's will instead of our own desires?
- ❓ Why do you think Paul points out that he is an imperfect messenger of Christ? Do you ever feel this way?

### Bible Connections

- ✚ Paul's call for agreement and unity in 1 Corinthians 1:10 is an important theme in all his letters. Some important examples include Philippians 2:1-11; Galatians 5:13-15; and Philemon.
- ✚ The Apollos whom Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 1:12 was an eloquent Jewish preacher from Ephesus, who also appears in Acts 18:24-28.
- ✚ The way of life that Paul is encouraging in his congregation is succinctly described by the "greatest commandment" (Mark 12:28-34).

### **Read 1 Corinthians 1:18 – The Power of the Cross**

- ❓ What is "the message of the cross"? How can it seem like foolishness to some people and like the very power of God to others?
- ❓ "Theology of the Cross" is a term that is used in many Protestant denominations to describe a theology centered on Christ's death and resurrection, and its impact in our lives. Martin Luther wrote the following about the theology of the cross: "One deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross... A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is" (Heidelberg Disputation, theses 20 and 21). What do you make of this quote? How does it relate to Paul's understanding of the message of the cross?

### Living the Story: Prayer

Split into pairs and take a few minutes to discuss what you hope to get out of the class this year.

#### Bible Nuts & Bolts: What Are Bible Resources?

There are many resources to help in reading the Bible. Many Bibles have concordances and appendices in the back that include maps, lists of where to find key terms and people, and more. There are also many print and Internet resources. Bible Gateway (<http://www.biblegateway.com/>) and Olive Tree (<http://www.olivetree.com/>) are two websites that include easy-to-use search. Bible Hub (<http://biblehub.com/>) is a website that has several translations of the Bible and other helpful resources. There are many print Bible dictionaries and commentaries, such as the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* and *Bible Commentary*. These resources can help readers learn about the historical, political, and social context of the Bible.

Think of a way to form that into a petition for a prayer. For instance, if you hope to form a new devotional practice, your petition might be "I pray that this year might strengthen my devotional practice." No need for all answers to be religious, joining this class to meet new friends is a perfectly good reason! After discussing with your partner and coming up with your petition, rejoin the large group. Have someone begin the prayer by saying the following or similar words:

"God, thank you so much for this opportunity to learn and study the Bible together. We prayer for..." then go

around and have each person share their petition for what they hope to get out of the class this year. When everyone has had an opportunity to share, the person who began the prayer says, “And the people of God said,” to which everyone responds, “Amen!”

## At Home

- ✚ Think of conflict in your life, family, or church community. How can it be resolved? What steps can you take to help reconcile opposing parties? Pray about it.
- ✚ Has there been a witness to the faith like Aquilla and Priscilla in your life? If so, say a prayer of thanksgiving for their example!
- ✚ Continue to reflect on saying, “Yes” or yielding to God. Perhaps begin each day by meditation on God’s plan for your life and end your meditation time by saying, “Yes!”

## Daily Readings

### **Sunday – Read Acts 18:1-4**

Paul begins his missionary work in Corinth. Look up images or icons of Priscilla and Aquilla and reflect on their life and ministry.

### **Monday – Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-18**

Paul writes a letter to the Corinthian church to help bring about unity. Pray for a community you know who is going through a conflict.

### **Tuesday – Read Acts 18:5-11**

Paul proclaims the word of God in Corinth. Send a message to someone in need of encouragement.

### **Wednesday – Read Acts 18:12-17**

Paul is brought before the governor to be put on trial. Pray for all facing persecution for their religious beliefs.

### **Thursday – Read Acts 18:18-23**

Paul returns to Antioch. Pray for all who are traveling.

### **Friday – Read 1 Corinthians 1:19-31**

Paul writes of the wisdom of God. Pray to God for wisdom to help illuminate a particular situation.

### **Saturday – Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-26**

Paul writes about the Lord’s Supper. What does the Lord’s Supper, or communion, mean to you?