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## SESSION TWO

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# The Gospel Calls for Unity

### SESSION SUMMARY

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This session gives direction and truth to guide our hearts and conduct toward unity. Our unity must be grounded in biblical convictions, not popular personalities. We will also contrast the wisdom and power this world has to offer with the wisdom and power displayed at the cross. This contrast will show us that our unity is increased as we recognize that we cannot brag about anything we've done for ourselves, only what He has done in us.

### SCRIPTURE

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1 Corinthians 1:10-31

# THE POINT

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**God calls us to strive for unity in the church in order to showcase the beauty of the cross.**

## INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

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### Option 1

Fables are fictional stories used to teach a specific moral or lesson. One of the most famous collections of these fables is called *Aesop's Fables*. Though the stories were made up and usually used animals as main characters, we still have a lot to learn from them. For example:

A LION used to prowl about a field in which Four Oxen used to dwell. Many a time he tried to attack them; but whenever he came near they turned their tails to one another, so that whichever way he approached them he was met by the horns of one of them. At last, however, they fell a-quarrelling among themselves, and each went off to pasture alone in a separate corner of the field. Then the Lion attacked them one by one and soon made an end of all four.<sup>1</sup>

The lion in the fable knew that as long as the four oxen stayed together he didn't stand a chance against them. However, the minute the four oxen decided to split up, their power through numbers disappeared. The lion resumed his attack and triumphed. Similarly, the Bible tells us that we have an adversary in Satan who prowls about like a lion seeking someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8). Satan loves to attack the body of Christ—the church—because he knows that if he can get us isolated, he can take us down by making us unproductive in the kingdom of God.

God has commissioned the church to take the message of the gospel to the nations. His plan is to use us as part of the local church to build the kingdom. When we are united through the cross, we stand as an undeniable force for the gospel. God's heart for us is to be a unified, powerful front against the schemes of the evil one. Not only is unity a critical line of defense, it is also crucial to our task of carrying the gospel to the nations.

- **What are some common causes of division within churches today? How might we begin to address those divisions?**

### Option 2

The word *unity* pops up in discussions about all kinds of groups of people—families, friends, churches, the government, races and ethnicities, and the list goes on. Where there are people in this sin-filled world, there will always be a little disunity. But believers should be different. As Joni Eareckson Tada explained it, “Believers are never told to *become* one—we’re *already* one and are expected to act like it.”<sup>2</sup> We are already one in Christ—and we are not “in Christ” because of anything we have done (so there should be no competition between believers), but because of what He has done for us all.

- **What are some things we should remember as we work toward unity in the church?**

# HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

## THE POINT

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**God calls us to strive for unity in the church in order to showcase the beauty of the cross.**

## CHARACTERS

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- **Paul:** former persecutor who became a Christ-follower and apostle to the Gentiles
- **Apollos:** an articulate preacher who was helped by Priscilla and Aquila

## PLOT

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Our world desperately needs unity—politically, socially, ethnically, economically, culturally—in a time when disunity is just as common as unity. The causes of disunity in these areas may vary, but the one place where unity should stand out is in the church. In fact, this is exactly what we see Paul advocating among the Corinthian church.

## TIMELINE

### UNITY IN THE CROSS

*Believers are united together in Christ.*

### SHOWING MERCY

*Those who know mercy show mercy to others.*

### A NEW IDENTITY

*Peter reminds God's people of their identity in Christ.*

## CHRISTIANS ARE UNIFIED IN CHRIST

Do you have any heroes in the faith—others you look up to as examples of following Jesus? There is nothing wrong with this, Paul himself encouraged the Corinthians (as well as other churches) to watch him closely and imitate his own actions (1 Cor 4:16; Phil. 3:17; 4:9). Of course, Paul didn't mean we should take this too far. In other words, we must be careful not to allow our spiritual leaders around us to become more than they were designed to be.

Though we don't always realize we do this, we love to put spiritual leaders on a pedestal, much like the church in Corinth. Instead of simply learning from their leaders and imitating their obedience, the Corinthians turned their affiliation with their heroes into status symbols, and a cause for arrogant boasting.

- **When have you or others given leaders or celebrities a higher place in your life than they deserved? What's the danger in doing this?**

**<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. <sup>12</sup> 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." <sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? <sup>14</sup> I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup> so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. <sup>16</sup> (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) <sup>17</sup> 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. (1 Cor. 1:10-17)**

*Divided. Immature. Quarreling.* These words describe the type of church Paul wrote to. Keep in mind that Paul was one of the original founders of this young church (Acts 18:1-11). However, after having spent eighteen months training them in the gospel, Paul continued on his missionary journey. It wasn't too long before he received reports of the immorality and disunity in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11).

Like a puzzle, you and I are part of a whole. Not one piece is alike, and no piece can stand alone. We don't make sense without each other. In the church at Corinth, people attempted to start a puzzle of their own. Men and women rallied around a different leader, then they tried to prove why their group was better than the others. They also fought a similar battle over spiritual gifts, continually debating over which gift was most important (1 Cor. 12–14). In response, Paul cautioned them that the church of God—the bride of Christ—is one body. God gifts every person with specific and necessary talents and resources meant to be used for the greater good (1 Cor. 12). Instead, the people of the Corinthian church attempted to use their gifts and talents, as well as their connections with a popular personality, to serve their own egos.

Unity grounded in gospel convictions lasts; unity attached to personalities doesn't. When the church at Corinth had several leaders to follow—the church fragmented. The same can be true of churches today when we have multiple staff members or strong leaders in the church body. Even a church where everyone is unified behind the same leader has placed its unity in danger, which we often see when that leader leaves the church. But the gospel is unchanging. The gospel will not leave. The gospel will not accidentally or intentionally make us take sides. That is why unity is grounded in the gospel alone.

- **How does the gospel help us maintain unity despite being diverse in so many other ways?** (*p. 16, PSG*)

## THE CROSS OF CHRIST IS THE WISDOM OF GOD

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After showing that true unity can be found in Christ alone, Paul went on to show us the brilliance of the cross. From the world's perspective, the cross makes no sense. The Jews were looking for the signs of the Messiah. They thought he would be a glorious king who would rescue them in a powerful, obvious way. An uneducated, unimportant Man from Galilee—who willingly walked to His death—did not fit the part. The wisdom-seeking Greeks didn't buy it either. Nothing about this crucified Jesus looked wise.

**<sup>18</sup> For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup> For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." <sup>20</sup> Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Cor. 1:18-25)**

But God's thoughts are not ours, nor are His ways ours (Isa. 55:8). God's use of the cross to bring about the deliverance of His people certainly falls into this category. Crucifixion was Rome's chosen manner of execution for slaves and non-citizens; because it was so cruel and shameful, only Roman citizens guilty of treason were crucified. To the Jewish mind and heart, the cross was a symbol of tyranny by an occupying foreign power. The thought that the long-awaited Messiah would end up being crucified was foolish because they believed the Messiah to be the One who would finally free them from this oppression. To them, Jesus' crucifixion closed the door on the possibility that He was the Messiah. While the Gentiles had no understanding of the Messiah, they saw the cross as foolishness because the idea of an executed criminal being a hero was absurd.

The world's wisdom sees the cross as foolishness, but God made the world's wisdom foolish through the cross (1 Cor. 3:19). The cross was God's plan to provide forgiveness for sinners who would never find forgiveness on their own. This young Corinthian church needed to remember that the gospel makes no sense from a human perspective. Not one of them (and not one of us) deserves the grace of God. Yet it is this very "foolishness" which binds us as believers. The undeserved forgiveness and abundant spiritual blessings we receive from our heavenly Creator unifies us even with all our earthly differences. Regardless of our backgrounds, spiritual gifts, or tightly held opinions, it is only through the cross we obtain eternal life with God. The gospel is our common denominator.

## THERE IS NO ROOM FOR PERSONAL BRAGGING

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Paul also made a point about how humility can drive unity. Let's take a look:

**26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Cor. 1:26-31)**

Notice whom God has chosen. People who are not wise, not powerful, and not of nobility. People who are weak, insignificant, and despised. That doesn't make for a good résumé, does it? Why did God choose people the world looks past? Paul answered that question twice—so that no one can brag about his own doing, but instead about what the Lord has done (1:29,31). God's choosing reminds us of His grace—our salvation is not based on who we are or what we have done—and drives us toward humility. We cannot brag on ourselves because we have nothing worth bragging about in ourselves.

## TIMELINE

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*\*Bonus Session*

### **THE RESURRECTION IS ESSENTIAL**

*Christianity stands or falls with the resurrection.*

### **LOVE IN ACTION**

*Love for God and others is the fruit of Christian living.*

### **LETTERS TO YOUNG PASTORS**

*Paul instructs Timothy and Titus.*

It is a great honor to know the Lord, our faithful, loving, righteousness Judge. There is much to boast in as believers. Again, this is our common denominator. Though we may have different preferences on how our church building should look, or opposing views on the details of our Sunday service, we are united in the fact that we can all point others to God as the faithful, loving Savior. As we fix our eyes on Jesus, instead of our supposed strengths and our tightly-held opinions, our hearts are naturally stirred for His name to be famed and we will joyfully and passionately proclaim His goodness to the nations.

- **When have you been tempted to brag about something in your life that God clearly did? How can you turn that around and share about what He has done in your life?** (p. 18, PSG)

## 99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

### Body of Christ (p. 17, PSG)

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*The New Testament describes the church as the body of Christ. The church lives and operates as Christ's representative here on earth, with Christ as its head (Col. 1:18). This means the church is an extension of Christ's ministry, carrying out His work by fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). The picture of the church as the body of Christ also shows us the connection between individual Christians as members depend on each other for growth and sanctification (1 Cor. 12).*

## CHRIST CONNECTION

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Paul addressed divisions in the Corinthian church by reminding believers that the gospel overturns human expectations and robs us of any ability to brag in our salvation. Jesus is our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption; therefore, selfish bragging and divisions have no place among God's people.

# YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

## GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **How does the gospel help us maintain unity despite being diverse in so many other ways?** *The session is pretty clear on this point—our common denominator as Christians, no matter what differences we may have, is Christ as our salvation. Because of Christ and what He accomplished on the cross, we have common ground in Him and should resist the temptation to brag about anything else.*
- **What are some ways we draw attention to ourselves instead of Christ?**  
*Answers will vary.*
- **Name a spiritual leader God has used to bring you closer to Him. What has this person taught you?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does the gospel allow you to see your gifts and talents and those of others in proper perspective?** *The gospel allows us to see that these gifts and talents aren't given to draw attention to us or impress others, but rather to serve others in the same way we have been served by Jesus.*

### HIS STORY

*God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.*

### YOUR STORY

*Where your story meets His.*

# YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



## HEAD

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Believers should have godly examples to look to and imitate. According to Hebrews 13:7, these leaders should speak God's Word and live in accordance with the Word of God. These criteria help us to evaluate which leaders around us deserve our attention. Are they leaders who love God's Word and handle/interpret it properly? Are they leaders who not only speak God's Word, but also live it out in their everyday lives? If so, then we should look to these leaders and learn from them.

- **Who are some heroes of the faith you look to personally?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is it important that the author of Hebrews instructed us to examine the outcome of a leader's faith before imitating him or her?** *At the very least, the author implied that the people we look up to spiritually should have a long history of faithful obedience. We obviously would not want to follow those without much of a history of obedient living or a small window of apparent faithful living followed by lifestyles of disobedience.*



## HEART

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The bragging heart is a prideful heart, and we know how God feels about pride. Throughout the Bible, Scripture speaks of God opposing or resisting the proud, but giving grace and favor to the humble (Ps. 138:6; Prov. 3:34; Luke 1:52; Jas. 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5). Why is that the case? Because pride and bragging are essentially a self-declaration of: "I'm good enough and don't need God." This is why we must constantly be on the lookout for pride and bragging in our lives so we can uproot them in our desire to pursue hearts of humility before God.

- **How might a personal focus on imitating the humility, service, and obedience of Christ bring greater unity to your church?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What areas do you brag about in your own life that prevent you from a closer relationship with God?** *Answers will vary.*



## HANDS

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We too often approach the body of Christ to be served by it. The church does serve as the hands and feet of Jesus, and we should receive from the church; however, many of us have the backward mindset that church is mostly about what we can get from the people of God, instead of holding on to a humble heart of service. Jesus Himself came not to be served but to serve, and this example of humility is what begins to unify us.

- **Why is it incorrect to only think of church as a place we go to receive something?** *Because church isn't about association only but participation.*
- **What are some areas where you can begin to give back through serving those around you this week?** *Answers will vary.*

## ► ADDITIONAL INFO

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### LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #4, which contains an informational poster on the Book of 1 Corinthians.

### SOURCES

1. Charles William Eliot, ed., *The Harvard Classics* (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909), 32.
2. Joni Eareckson Tada, *Glorious Intruder: God's Presence in Life's Chaos* (New York: Waterbrook Multnomah, 1989), 82.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to [lifeway.com/TGPSPR18Letters](http://lifeway.com/TGPSPR18Letters))**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at  
**[GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources](http://GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources)**

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit  
**[MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject](http://MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject)**