

1 Corinthians Session 1: A Foolish Start? (1 Cor 1:1-31)

(Scripture references based on NIV)

1. Key Learning Objectives

Key pointers to keep in mind as you prepare and lead the session.

To understand that:

- Christians are to strive for unity in word, mind and thought under Christ.
- God often chooses a reversal of what the world prides itself on to show his power.

2. Warm-up activity / Starter Question

These questions are meant to establish a baseline level of understanding or tease the themes of today's passage. You may pick one of the three. There is no need to hear from everyone or correct any opinions here.

- What can you not live without?
- Was there something you genuinely thought was important to Christianity but was actually not?
- Why might someone be ashamed of the gospel?

3. Opening Prayer

Thank God for bringing each member to church and to the small group today. Thank God for His valuable Word that contains great truths for us to live by. Ask Him for the desire to dig into God's Word, and that it will change our hearts and lives.

4. Context

This section sets the context for the whole book of 1 Corinthians. You may share some of these details with your group to help them understand the social and cultural context of the church in Corinth that Paul was writing to.

The city of Corinth:

- Demographics
 - Corinth was cosmopolitan, prosperous, morally (sexually) corrupt, pagan, and self-centred.
 - Cosmopolitan city with Greeks, Romans, Orientals, Jews and many other nationalities. There were enough of each demographic that there was no homogeneous ruling class.

- Commercial
 - Strategically located for the exchange of both ideas and trade.
 - There was a sizable number of both permanent residents and transient merchants and sailors.
 - Probably the most prosperous city in all of Greece.
- Culture and ethics
 - Morally corrupt with open prostitution and sexual looseness; Sexual promiscuity was viewed by Gentiles as a cultural norm (or even a virtue by some), and not a sin.
 - Rampant idolatry in economic and social life; it was practically impossible to identify whether food (meat) had been offered to idols before or not.
 - Diversity in the city led to a factious spirit within the church. This is the ancient equivalent of the modern-day American slant toward “individual rights”, but on an individual level; that is, “I have my own rights, and these are more important than others’ rights”.
- Philosophy
 - Greek philosophy being at loggerheads with Christianity likely led to the dispute about resurrection (1 Cor 15), among other things. A prominent tenet was that ‘Matter/the body/the physical is evil and the spiritual is good’, which is also to say that people could do whatever they wanted with their bodies/others’ bodies.
 - The individual as a bearer of “rights” was not a concept that was as accepted then. In a sense, as long as you had the power over another, you are their god and they are anything you want them to be. Slavery (of those who were unwilling) is a clear expression of this. Those who underwent the death penalty were left hanging in the public square; no dignity or modesty of the body or of others in general. Sentiments like this may also explain their sexual climate.

Writing of 1 Corinthians

- The book of 1 Corinthians was written by the apostle Paul around the year 53-56 AD, likely during his second missionary journey.
- Paul wrote this letter in response to the Corinthian church who had a few moral and theological problems. These include:
 - the Christian view of marriage,
 - the practice of eating meat sacrificed to idols,
 - the manner in which women should dress for public worship,
 - the proper observance of the Lord's supper,
 - the relative value of spiritual gifts,
 - and the resurrection of the dead.

(Most of this context was gleaned and summarised from [here](#).)

5. Scripture Reading

Assign one or two youths to read the passage aloud.

6. Discussion Questions

Q1-2: A gifted but divided church (v1-17)

1) a) In the NIV, v4-9 is labelled as "Thanksgiving". What does Paul give thanks for?

Probe further: What picture of the Corinthian church does this paint for us?

- v4-5 - The Corinthians have been enriched in all kinds of speech and with all knowledge.
- v7 - They are sufficiently equipped.
- v8-9 - God's faithfulness to them.

It is characteristic of Paul to begin his letter with thanksgiving. This is his way of edifying the Corinthians, building them up with the basic, bedrock truth of God's faithfulness (v9), in spite of whatever else he has to admonish them with later. Keep this example of edification in mind as it is contrasted with how the Corinthians deal with others later in the study.

b) From v10, the main issue in the Corinthian church has to do with unity. With reference to v11-17, what areas might the Corinthians be divided about? How does Paul correct their beliefs?

Use the table below as a framework to fill in the columns over the course of discussion. The left column can be revealed as hints/prompts. The Corinthians' beliefs can also be implied from Paul's response in v13-17.

The Corinthians are divided about the issue of following/revering/valuing their spiritual leaders differently in a manner that causes division.

Corinthian beliefs that Paul MAY be implying	Paul's correction
"As long as I follow (insert spiritual leader), I will be fine." (v12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The power and authority of church leaders is founded on the power and authority of Christ: what Jesus did (v17) and who He is.• The leader is only an imitation, and it makes more sense to follow the one being imitated

	directly.
<p>“I was baptised by spiritual leader X, so I follow spiritual leader X only.” (v14)</p> <p>Alternatively, “The person whom I was baptised by is of significance”.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paul is glad that he did not baptise any of them as that might form another line of division in the church (v13). • Baptism is not essential to who the Corinthians follow (v12). Even if Paul did baptise them, they should still follow Christ. <p><i>Note: Baptism means “born again”. It is an outward sign to the baptised person’s community that they are a Christian.</i></p>
<p>“I should follow spiritual leader Y because they preach well and seem wise” (v17)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christ sent Paul to preach the gospel because that is of utmost importance. Preaching the gospel with “wisdom and eloquence” (v17) is not as important. • In fact, preaching with “wisdom and eloquence” is less valuable as it might distract the recipient from the “power of the cross”.

Note: The rhetoric Paul used (v13), along with the expressions in the left column may not precisely convey what the Corinthians believed, but his correction (as explained in the right column) is still insightful for us.

2) Considering questions 1a and 1b, how would you summarise the state of the Corinthian church?

To consolidate the discussion in 1a and 1b.

The church was gifted (in speech and knowledge) but divided over the wisdom and significance of their different leaders.

Q3-5: The “foolish” power of God (v18-31)

3) How does the "power of God" manifest with reference to v18-25?

The aim of this question is to get youths to explore the passage in depth, as it will help understanding in the following two questions.

The power of God manifests in:

- v18: The message of the cross
- v19-20: Negating the wisdom of the world, or, conventional wisdom
- v21-23: those who are saved through the Gospel of Christ crucified, which the world views as “foolishness”
- v24: Christ is the power of God

4) What is seemingly foolish about God's way of bringing about salvation?

- Conventional wisdom would tell us that those who are strong, smart, and capable come out on top.
- In contrast, God brings about salvation through Jesus dying on a cross, which sounds like an absolute failure and an unlikely means of what one would typically deem victorious.

5) In v18-31, Paul is unashamed, and even proclamatory, in describing the “foolishness of the gospel”. Why is Paul so bold in openly embracing this “foolishness”, especially when it has negative connotations?

Supporting question: Despite how foolish the gospel seems, what does God intend for it to achieve?

From the passage

- Jesus’ death on the cross is stupidity to those who do not believe, but it is God’s power to save for those who believe (v18).
- Christ crucified is “the power and the wisdom of God” (v23-24).

Paul’s boldness

- Comes from His trust in God’s higher ways.
- He knows that God was intentional about subverting things we would consider good by conventional wisdom, i.e. that God’s wisdom is greater than human wisdom (Isaiah 55:8-9).
- This may be a barrier to belief for some (e.g. the Jews and Greeks in v22), but that is also intentional, so that God would be shown to be infinitely wiser and more powerful than men (v25).

- From all human perspectives, God's ways appear foolish. However, that is precisely Paul's point! If one is bad at public speaking, the only way one can give a good speech is if someone else were to do it for them. Similarly, the only reason why foolish or stupid things can work out is because God turns things around for good (Gen 50:20). Hence, if we were to boast about something, we ought to boast in the Lord (v31) - certainly not because they were good to begin with.

7. Main Discipleship Takeaway

Ask the youths how they would summarise everything that has been discussed today with one sentence. A question you could ask is: In summary, what does Paul hope for the Corinthians to know and do?

Christians are to be united in mind and thought in the gospel of Christ, which is God's power to save. Although it is deemed foolish by the world, that is by God's purposeful intention.

8. Application / Reflection

Depending on your group size, you may consider splitting the group into smaller groups to share. Leaders are encouraged to have prepared their own thoughts and sharing for the application questions.

- 1) How might Paul's thanksgiving influence the reasons, manner, or contexts in which we give thanks?
- 2) Division is not diversity. Division sneaks into the church and breeds an "us-versus-them" mentality. What are some areas in which this might have happened in YM/Wesley? How should we think/respond instead?
 - *Discussion prompts:*
 - i) *Favour for particular leaders - "Who's preaching today?"*
 - ii) *Preferences in small groups - "Eh guys, today no need to go through curriculum lah; looks kinda meh. We free and easy this week." or "My YSG meets every week but I rather meet every other week..."*
 - iii) *Participation in church events - "I always go overseas whenever YM camp rolls around..."*
 - iv) *Denominations - "WMC is a good balance: not so boring like X but not so out there like Y..."*

- 3) When might you feel ashamed to be a “fool” or hold “foolish” beliefs for God? How does today’s passage encourage you?
- *Further prompts: What do Christians do/believe that seem foolish to others? What prevalent schools of thought seem like wisdom to the world but are actually incompatible with the Christian faith?*

9. Closing Prayer

Remain in your smaller groups and take turns to pray for each other. Where there is time, encourage members to share about specific areas for prayer in their lives.

- Ask God for faith in His faithfulness.
- Ask God for persistence in the unity of the church.
- Pray for those who trust primarily in themselves.