

introduction

“There is yet more truth and light to break forth from God’s Holy Word.”

These words were spoken by Pastor John Robinson to the 17th century Pilgrims as they departed from Holland for what would become Massachusetts Bay Colony. God’s word is alive. God will always have something new to say to us. So listen up! Because God is still speaking.

There have been and are many Bible studies, and many fine ones. How is a *Listen Up!* Bible study different from another Bible study?

The answer is at once simple and complex. It is simple because the primary point of participation in these Bible studies is to hear God speak to us today. Simple: the point is to hear God speak to us.

But that is also complex, because there is no simple formula that insures this will happen. Hearing God speak is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who is active in our midst. We hope that the background, questions and guides for sharing in these Bible studies will assist you in hearing God speak to us today.

My own experience is that hearing God speak often means having a particular word or phrase or image reach out and grab me or “speak to me” in a way that is deep and real. I may not fully understand why. But some word or phrase—whether from the Bible itself or from our reflection together on it—connects. Perhaps it challenges. It may even “convict,” that is reveals a way in which I haven’t been honest with myself. Maybe it comforts.

Keep the simple point in mind: our primary purpose is to listen and hear God speak. That also means that it is not our primary purpose to teach you all about the Bible or all about a particular book of the Bible. To be sure, we hope that together we will learn a great deal about whatever book of Scripture is our focus. But the primary purpose is not simply learning information about the Bible. It is hearing God speak. There is a difference.

To this end, this and the other Bible studies in this series encourage you to listen: 1) to the biblical text, 2) to your own questions and responses to it, and 3) to the honest sharing among the participants in your group. Trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit, we believe that in that mix of biblical text, personal engagement, and honest speaking and listening in a respectful group, God’s word may be heard.

One of our forebears in the faith, John Calvin, described God’s Word as not simply words on a page, but as an event. Calvin said something like this: “God’s Word occurs when the same Spirit is present to those who read as to those who wrote.” God’s Word is an event, an event that happens when receptive hearts and minds open themselves to Scripture in the company of other seekers and believers.

We do hope that you learn something—perhaps a great deal—about the particular book of the Bible that is the topic of this study. But most of all, we hope that this series of lessons and small group suggestions will enable you to hear God speaking words of challenge and words of comfort to you and your companions in this experience.

why 1 corinthians?

ANTHONY B. ROBINSON

Some years ago now, after completing seminary in New York City, I began my work as a minister at a 200-member congregation in a farming community outside of Seattle. As part of the transition, my family and I took the train across the U.S. On arrival in mid-summer our new community appeared the very picture of rural beauty and tranquility.

But that would prove deceptive.

It turned out that we had walked into a congregational battle zone. At the first church meeting I attended, of the Board of Trustees, there was a motion on the floor to withdraw from our denomination, the United Church of Christ (UCC). What in the world was going on? And why hadn't somebody warned me?

Between the time the Search Committee had issued its call to me and our arrival several months later, divisions within the congregation that had been latent had become enflamed. The precipitating issue was an action, just weeks before, by the United Church of Christ's governing body to support the civil rights of gays and lesbians. While some few members of the congregation rejoiced in this, the large majority were indifferent or unaware. But a group that included both church members and active non-members were incensed by the action. This group had crowded into the Trustees meeting demanding immediate withdrawal from the UCC.

At that first meeting, with the motion to leave the denomination on the floor, the Chair of the Trustees turned to me, all of twenty-eight years old, to ask if I had something I might like to say. What I wanted to say was, "Are you people crazy?" But instead I said that as their new pastor I would like to have a few

weeks to get to know people and to be in the pulpit before any such decision was made. Gratefully, the motion was tabled.

As I staggered back to the parsonage late that night, something from my recent seminary education nagged in the back of my mind. I had a vague recollection that Paul's first letter to the Church at Corinth had something to do with conflict, with a congregation that was divided up into various warring factions. I began to hatch an idea. I'd suggest that we devote the next sixteen weeks to a chapter by chapter study of this letter to a feuding congregation. In addition to my Sunday sermons on the letter, I would propose that the congregation be divided into small groups for Bible study of the Corinthians passages in homes during the week.

This saved my bacon. It bought me, and those who weren't about to be stampeded into leaving the denomination, time. Moreover, it had the advantage of being "Bible study." The self-proclaimed "born-again Christians" who were so angry by the action in favor of gays and lesbians could hardly object to Bible study, could they?

In September we began sixteen weeks of study, small groups and preaching on 1 Corinthians, Paul's letter to a factionalized and fractured congregation which he had founded several years earlier. This provided a cooling-off period.

But really it did far more. For we discovered together in 1 Corinthians a new and renewed sense of what it meant to be the church.

Whether or not your congregation has experienced conflict and division in the past, or is troubled by some form of it today, you will find here a rich reflection on what it means

to be the church, as well as analysis of some of the chronic ways in which church health and vitality are undermined from within. And the brilliance of Paul's letter is that all of this is grounded theologically and in the gospel. That is to say, he doesn't simply say, "Now, now, can't we just all get along?" Nor does he appeal to people to be nicer or more tolerant. His argument is a much deeper one. It is based on what God has done in Jesus Christ.

On this basis Paul works to develop a theological argument challenging those who make arrogant claims to superior faith or knowledge. He pulls the rug out from under those who, in the name of their righteous cause, would destroy the health and vitality of the church, which Paul calls "the body of Christ." No one escapes judgment, all stand in need of grace, as Paul works away at the issues.

As he does so he hits on a number of sub-themes that bear on life together in the church: sexual morality, the place of the human body for Christians, food and diet, spiritual gifts and their use, including speaking in tongues, the meaning and celebration of Holy Communion, and—famously in 1 Corinthians 13—love.

a brief overview of 1 corinthians

Because our six lessons cannot cover all of this wonderful letter to a church struggling with serious conflict, here is a brief overview of the letter as a whole:

Chapters 1-4 provide Paul's introduction and thanksgiving for the church at Corinth, then elaborate the core issue of conflict and spiritual arrogance.

Chapters 5-14 take up a number of specific issues and questions that trouble the life of the Corinthian church, including sexual morality, marriage, eating, the Lord's Supper and spiritual gifts.

Chapters 15-16 bring the letter to conclusion with an exploration of the heart of the gospel message and Paul's closing words and blessing.

Should a group leader or participant desire a resource for further study we suggest the commentary by Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, in the Interpretation series published by John Knox Press (1997). This commentary will be cited occasionally in our study.

leader's guide

The Leader's Role & Life Together in Your Bible Study Group

The leader plays a crucial role in keeping the group on task and focused. This is the primary role of the leader. The leader does not need to be an expert on the Bible or on 1 Corinthians. He or she does need to be comfortable leading a group with a strong but gentle hand. It will be important that the leader pay close attention to both the Scripture lesson itself and to the interpretative material in the lesson plan. She or he will need to be prepared to summarize, if possible in his or her own words, the key themes. If putting the material in one's own words is a bit more of a challenge than you as a leader are ready for, you may simply read to the group the key themes material.

The leader is also charged with keeping the group itself moving through the steps of the format and design. One person may lead all six sessions, or the role of leader may move among different members of the group. Either way, the role is important. The leader needs to come well prepared and be comfortable guiding the group's process. *Successful classes and study groups do not wander all over the place, nor are group members who may be inclined to "take over" allowed to do so.*

To keep the group and experience focused the leader is encouraged to clearly state the group purpose at the beginning of each session.

Purpose Statement:

The purpose of this class is to study 1 Corinthians and by doing so to grow in our knowledge and understanding of Scripture, to hear God's word for us and for our church today, and to grow in our friendship with one another.

To make the experience most fruitful, group members are also encouraged to come prepared, having done their homework!

To support the group and the leader, we include a group "Covenant" that expresses group norms. We encourage you to review and re-affirm this covenant at the beginning of each session. (See "Class Session Outline" below).

Timing and Options

Lessons have been planned for congregations that have a 50-minute time period on Sunday morning. But lessons can be expanded to 90 minutes by allowing more time for discussion and sharing. If you are able to expand the time, we encourage you to also enlarge the prayer experience at the conclusion of each lesson. Instead of simply having a closing prayer, the leader may invite people in the groups to share their own prayer concerns before a time of prayer. Leaders may also encourage class members to write down these shared prayer concerns and to hold in prayer during the week the concerns and people who have shared them. This format of sharing prayer concerns can also be done during the 50-minute framework, providing concerns are kept brief. We encourage you to consider enriching the prayer experience in this way.

Beyond this option, leaders may adapt this material and the lesson plans to their group and setting. For example, some leaders may wish to draw on the “Interpreting the Text” commentary and homework questions for the group session itself. We want to provide a clear structure that you can rely on, but we also want leaders and groups to adapt this material in ways that work best for you where you are.

Overview of Lesson and Flow of Classes

Each lesson has two parts, the Homework and the Class Session. The Homework consists of four parts. Each class session consists of ten steps. Here they are in outline:

Homework

- ① First reading of the biblical passage
- ② Second reading of biblical passage
- ③ "Interpreting the Text" commentary
- ④ Homework questions

Class Session

- ① Welcome all, introductions and nametags as needed
- ② Review of Class Purpose and Class Covenant
- ③ Opening prayer
- ④ Reading the biblical passage aloud (a silent, individual re-reading following the out-loud reading is an option)
- ⑤ Participant sharing of words or phrases from lesson. Note: this out-loud sharing need not be full sentences, only the words or phrases from the lesson that struck people, that touched or provoked them as they listened. At this point, there is to be neither discussion or crosstalk (things like, "I don't agree," or giving advice, e.g. "oh yeah, I had that concern once," " " or "what you need to do is")
- ⑥ Leader's Presentation
- ⑦ Group discussion guided by leader questions
- ⑧ Response Time, writing brief responses to three questions
- ⑨ Sharing, as people wish, of what they wrote. Again, at this point there is no discussion or crosstalk, only listening to one another.
- ⑩ Reminder of next week's lesson and closing prayer

And now . . . have fun! Listen for the Spirit! Enjoy 1 Corinthians!