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SESSION ONE

1 Corinthians 1:1-30

Learner Session Guide



Focus Statement

In baptism we are claimed by Christ for God.

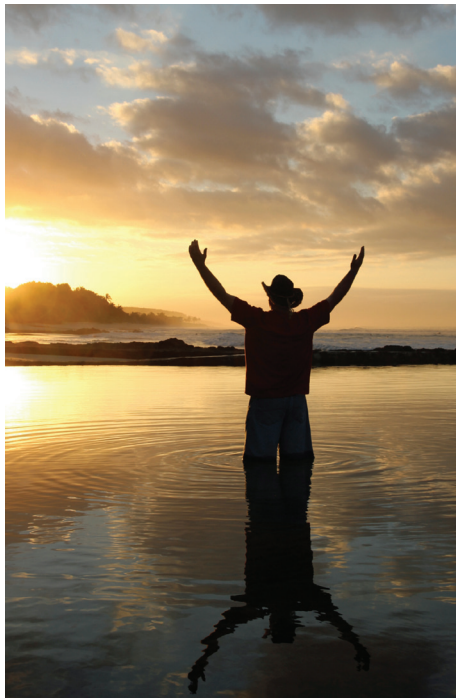


Key Verse

[God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. **1 Corinthians 1:30**

Whose Am I?

Focus Image



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Gather

Check-in

Take this time to connect or reconnect with the others in your group.

Pray

Blessed Lord God, you have caused the Holy Scriptures to be written for the nourishment of your people. Grant that we may hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that comforted by your promises, we may embrace and forever hold fast to the hope of eternal life, which you have given us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 72)

Focus Activity

In one minute or less, write down the names of persons or groups that claim you as theirs.

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Open Scripture

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-30.

- What words or phrases caught your attention as you listened to this text?
- What people or situations were called to mind?
- What concerns were raised?

Join the Conversation

Literary Context

1. The first three verses of the session Scripture text make it clear that this is a letter written by the apostle Paul to the congregation he founded in Corinth. This was one of several congregations he established in cities scattered around the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. This letter is part of an ongoing long-distance relationship between Paul and members of the Corinthian church involving multiple letters, some of which have not survived (see 1 Corinthians 5:9; 7:1).

- Reading this letter is like listening in on one side of a telephone conversation. Based on what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, how would you describe his relationship with the church in Corinth? What seems to be happening in the congregation?
- Reread 1 Corinthians 1:2-9 and 1:26-31 and circle the words that Paul uses to describe the Corinthian congregation and its members. What are the characteristics of the church and its members? What or who is the source of these attributes? To whom do the people belong?

2. Wisdom is an important theme in the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians, where Paul contrasts God’s wisdom with worldly wisdom.

- Look again at 1 Corinthians 1:17-31. What is wisdom? What is at the heart and center of God’s wisdom, according to Paul?
- List some examples of worldly wisdom that are current in our culture today. How would they measure up against God’s wisdom, as defined by Paul?

Historical Context

1. First Corinthians was written about five years after Paul planted the church in Corinth. This means that the first readers were relatively new Christians. They were still learning how to integrate faith with their previously held values, attitudes, and behavior. As first-century Greeks and Romans, they had been raised in a culture that placed a very high value on public honor and prestige deriving from social status. If one was not nobly born, well educated, or influential in society, one could acquire public prestige by associating with those who were. Working for, providing services to, and being seen in the company of high-status persons were ways that one could improve one’s public image.

- Reread 1 Corinthians 1:10-16. How are these values evident in the behavior of the Corinthian Christians?
- To learn more about Apollos and Cephas, read Acts 18:24—19:1 and Galatians 1:18—2:14. What attributes of these men might have given them higher status than Paul, in the eyes of some Corinthian Christians?

2. Look at 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 again. According to Paul, what does God think of the Corinthian concern for honor and status among church members?

- What characteristics give church members status and importance today? How would Paul respond to these persons?

Lutheran Context

1. Martin Luther’s teaching about the “theology of the cross” states that God comes to us in the very last place a reasonable person would think to look: as a baby sleeping in a manger, as a rough carpenter/healer/teacher from a backwoods region, and as a condemned rebel dying on a Roman cross.

- Reread 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. How does this passage support the theology of the cross?
- According to the theology of the cross, where are we most likely to find God present and actively at work in our communities? What



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implications does the theology of the cross have for how we ought to treat one another?

2. In the *Large Catechism*, Luther writes, “To be baptized in God’s name is to be baptized not by human beings but by God himself. Although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God’s own act” (*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert [Fortress Press, 2000], 457.10).

- How does Luther’s theology of the cross help us understand how God is active in human actions involving ordinary things like water?
- Consider Luther’s claim that baptism is God’s act. How does this change the way you think about baptism and what it means in your life?

Devotional Context

1. In the Focus Activity, you made a list of persons or groups that might claim you as their own. Review that list. Who is on your list and who is not? Why? If you had to rank the names on that list, which one would you put first? Based on Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians 1:1-30, what might God have to say about your list? Whose are you? To whom do you really belong?

2. Look back at the Focus Image for the session. How does that image relate to Paul’s message about baptism in 1 Corinthians 1:10-17? How might it resonate with Luther’s understanding of baptism? How does it reflect your own experience of baptism?

3. Review the order for Holy Baptism in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (pp. 225–231). Reflect on how the words of the service might help us understand whose we are and to whom we belong.

- Draw or describe how you would picture doubt, then do the same for faith. What similarities and differences do you see between doubt and faith?
- Write or say a prayer asking and expecting God to give you the gift of wisdom.

Wrap-up

Be ready to look back over the work your group has done in this session.

Pray

We give you thanks, O God, that through water and the Holy Spirit you give us new birth, cleanse us from sin, and raise us to eternal life. Stir

up in your people the gift of your Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever. Amen. (ELW, p. 237)

Extending the Conversation

Homework

1. Read the next session's Bible text: 1 Corinthians 3:1–4:5.
2. Begin each day by remembering your baptism and reminding yourself that you have been claimed by Christ for God, who is the source of your life and your salvation.
3. Become a “theologian of the cross” who intentionally seeks to be open to God’s presence in the ordinary, hidden, and unexpected. Spend some time each day looking and listening for Christ in places where you would not normally expect to see, hear, or experience the divine. You might keep a daily journal in which you record your sightings of this God who is hidden in the ordinary.

Enrichment

1. If you want to read all of 1 and 2 Corinthians during this unit, read the following sections this week.
 - Day 1: 1 Corinthians 1:1-17
 - Day 2: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25
 - Day 3: 1 Corinthians 1:26—2:5
 - Day 4: 1 Corinthians 2:6-16
 - Day 5: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9
 - Day 6: 1 Corinthians 3:10-15
 - Day 7: 1 Corinthians 3:16—4:5
2. Learn more about wisdom in the Bible and in the ancient world. You might read Job 28, Proverbs 1-2 and 8-9, or Ecclesiastes in the Bible; or search the Internet for information about ancient philosophers (literally “lovers of wisdom”) such as Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans, and the Stoics.
3. Watch the movie *Romero* (Paulist Productions, 1989) or *Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace* (Vision Video, 2000). How is God’s wisdom evident in these stories?



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For Further Reading

Charles B. Cousar, *A Theology of the Cross: The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters* (Augsburg Fortress, 1990).

Douglas John Hall, “The Theology of the Cross: A Usable Past.” Available at www.elca.org.

From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians. DVD and book available at www.shoppbs.org.

Robert Kolb, “Luther on the Theology of the Cross” *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2002): 443-466. Available at www.lutheranquarterly.com (previous issues, Winter 2002).

Martin E. Marty, *Baptism: A User’s Guide* (Augsburg Fortress, 2008).

Kirsi Stjerna, *No Greater Jewel: Thinking about Baptism with Luther* (Augsburg Fortress, 2009).