

Literary beginnings are frequently more memorable than literary endings. You may recognise the words, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” If you do, can you remember the closing words of that same novel? You can probably quote from memory the opening verse of Genesis, but can you do the same for the closing verse?

In many church traditions, 2 Corinthians is a bit of an outlier, for many churches quote the closing verse at the end of every service. Even if they don’t know where the words come from, members of those churches certainly know the words. You might be familiar with them yourself.

Before we consider that closing verse, however, we need to consider the preceding verses, which form a very rich closing section.

## Exhortations (v. 11)

Packed into a single, short verse, are five important, concluding exhortations. These exhortations are addressed to “brothers” highlighting Paul’s judgement of charity toward the Corinthians and his familial love for them, despite the way that they had (mis)treated him.

Interestingly, Paul used the term “brothers” to open the first two major sections of this letter [1:8; 8:1], but not the third [chapters 11–13], which were addressed largely to the unrepentant minority in the church. Here, however, he returns to familial language as he draws the letter to a close.

The exhortations are attended by the promise of God’s empowering love and peace. Because they were “brothers” in the Lord, they had the power they needed to obey the fivefold exhortation that Paul gave.

First, they were to “rejoice.” Paul knew that repentance would produce joy in the church at Corinth, as it does in the presence of God (Luke 15:7). His injunction for the church to rejoice, therefore, is a faith-filled imperative, coupled with the hope-filled expectation that the Corinthians were on the verge of joyful unity.

### TO THINK ABOUT

There are many things that can potentially rob a Christian of joy. One of the most common is a refusal to repent and a commitment to cling to sin. Unrepentance has a way to cause rifts between believers and therefore within churches. Is there perhaps some unconfessed sin in your life that requires repentance and a fresh embrace of joy?

Second, they were to “aim for restoration.” “Restoration” speaks of putting something back in its proper place or returning it to its proper condition. As we have seen, the harmony in the Corinthian church had been severely dented. Paul urged the Corinthians to work hard to see the unity of the church restored. While he knew that the Spirit produces unity between believers, he nevertheless considered it to be the responsibility of the believers to work for restored unity.

### TO THINK ABOUT

How can believers in the local church “aim for restoration”? What, practically, do we need to do in order to actively work to see unity restored and maintained in the church?

Third, they were to “comfort one another.” If anyone knew the depth of hurt that could be caused by disruption of harmony in the church, it was Paul. He had felt deeply the pain of disrupted unity, and he therefore knew that a church that was in the throes of turmoil must be hurting. As they aimed for restoration, therefore, they needed to be committed to comforting one another.

Fourth, they were to “agree with one another.” More than any other church to which he ministered, the Corinthians needed to learn to agree with one another. Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2–3) were a mere microcosm of the disagreement that existed between believers in Corinth. Through the influence of the super-apostles, the church had come to question virtually everything that Paul had ever taught them. They desperately needed to learn to agree with one another.

Of course, Paul was not necessarily urging full agreement in every minor detail, but as a church they at least needed to agree on the main things. God’s truth needed to be their standard and source of unity.

Fifth, they were to “live in peace.” Only as they heeded the earlier exhortations would the church learn to live in peace. But it was possible, for the God of love and peace was willing to empower them to obey what Paul exhorted. As they trusted the Lord, he would impart his own character to them, which would enable them to live as God’s people ought to live.

But notice, again, that while God’s power was available to them to obey these exhortations, obedience would not come about through passivity.

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*“The Christian life and the existence of unity within the church do not come through passivity. We must work at every aspect all the time. Restoration is work, comfort is work, agreement is work, peace is work, and even rejoicing requires thought and effort. Paul called for continuous, specific effort for the church—and everything depended upon their response.”*

R. Kent Hughes

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## Greetings (vv. 12–13)

In his closing greeting to the church, Paul urges them to “greet one another with a holy kiss” (v. 12) and then tells them that “all the saints [in the city from which he was writing] greet you” (v. 13). In this greeting, we again see the apostle’s concern for unity in the church.

It was customary in ancient Eastern cultures (as it is in many contemporary Eastern cultures) to greet with a kiss. Paul takes this customary greeting and transforms it into something peculiarly Christian by enjoining a “holy” kiss.

Whatever else can be said about the act of greeting with a kiss, it is obvious to all that it is a particularly intimate way to greet. To greet others with a kiss displays particular affection, and affection implies unity. Paul enjoined the holy kiss in both of his inspired letters to the Corinthians, and then again only in Romans (from where he wrote 2 Corinthians). He seems to have urged this particular form of greeting because this church, more than any other, needed to regain the unity that they once shared. This injunction, therefore, is an injunction to restored unity.

If they needed any further motivation for unity, it lay in the fact that saints from other churches sent their greetings in a show of solidarity. The unity produced by the Spirit was not only a reality between members of the same local church, but also between members of other gospel-preaching local churches.

### TO THINK ABOUT

In what practical ways can we, members of Brackenhurst Baptist Church, send greeting to members of sister churches? Paul was deliberate in many of his epistles in letting the church to which he was writing know that other churches sent their greeting. How can we mimic this in our setting today?

## Benediction (v. 14)

The benediction affords Paul one last opportunity to appeal to the principle of Christian unity. As there is unity in the Godhead—“the Lord Jesus Christ,” “God” (the Father), and “the Holy Spirit”—so that unity is to be worked out in the life of the church. Paul’s intention here is not to expound the mysteries of the Trinity, but to highlight the unity that exists within the Godhead, which should work its way into the church.

What is necessary for unity to be embraced in the church? Three things: grace, love, and fellowship. We need the grace that comes from Jesus Christ, the love that comes from God the Father, and the fellowship that comes from the Holy Spirit.

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*“Here, then, at the close of his epistle, Paul demonstrates that concern for the unity of the Corinthian church which has been in his heart throughout his correspondences with them, most explicitly in the First Epistle, but also in the Second. Such loving unity in Christ is not of human creation, but comes from God through his Spirit. We should treasure it.”*

(Geoffrey Grogan)

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