

Identity and Purpose

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 (January 22, 2023)

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¹⁰Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹²What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." ¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. ¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Historical Context

Corinth was a major port which also commanded the land route from the Peloponnesus peninsula to central Greece. An industrial and ship-building center, it was also a center for the arts. Its inhabitants came from far and wide. In this epistle, Paul answers two letters he has received concerning lack of harmony and internal strife in the Corinthian church, a church he had founded. Paul wrote this letter from Ephesus (now in Turkey), probably in 57 AD.

Theme: Identity and Purpose

Paul writes of having received reports that the Corinthians have divided themselves up. When he urges "the same mind and the same purpose" (verse 10), Paul may sound like someone who is simply uncomfortable with conflict, but he has his sights on something greater than keeping the peace. The individual points of division in Corinth are merely a presenting symptom of an underlying problem: the Corinthians do not understand that the cross of Christ was God's way of upending their old ways of defining and valuing themselves and one another. Old forms of identity, old ways of understanding oneself and one's neighbor: these are replaced by membership in one body of Christ and sharing in the one Spirit.

Paul's choice to talk about baptism at the start of a letter concerned principally with divisions in a church is not random. Paul's point is that the unity he seeks for the church comes from their shared connection, through baptism, to the one who was crucified and through him, to one another. Unity of mind and purpose is born from a baptism that connects all participants to Christ's death and resurrection.

For identity markers, we still look to things like race, age, economic circumstances, education, and geographical region to create meaningful boundaries and to identify our tribes.

For Paul, the death and resurrection of Christ signals the beginning of an age in which all the ways the Corinthians have divided themselves into groups just aren't any longer interesting, important or defining. To be baptized is to be joined with all the other baptized to the risen life of Christ and to be, as Christ is, numbered among God's children. In our baptism, we have all the identity and purpose we need.