

Dear Church, It's Not About You!  
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January 25, 2026 – Epiphany 3A  
1 Corinthians 1:10-18

If you were part of the Church in ancient Corinth, you probably did not want to get a letter from your founder, Paul. Even if your leadership group had written to him to ask for help and advice with a pressing issue, chances were that a) if he had actually written a letter back to you, the situation was very serious; and b) you might not like to hear what he had to say about it.

Over the course of five or six years in the middle of the first century CE, Paul wrote to the Corinthian church at least half a dozen times. There are varying schools of thought about exactly how much Paul wrote, and to whom. In the case of Corinth in particular, that debate centers around how much of his writing has been lost to history, and how the two complete Letters enshrined in the Bible might have been edited together into the finished product. Regardless, these two Letters suggest strongly that the Corinthians struggled with the everyday, lived reality of being in community with one another. They weren't afraid to ask Paul for help when they couldn't quite resolve critical issues on their own. Nor was Paul afraid to tell them exactly what he thought, even if he did use harsh language which hurt people's feelings – and for which he had to apologize – on at least a couple of occasions.

If we read the Letter as a whole, 1 Corinthians is, itself, a master class in constructive problem solving. The overall themes in this opening chapter, which recur in some way throughout the Letter, remind Paul's readers of four things: one, that they are all in this together, whether they know it, or even like it; two, that they have everything they need, IF they can pool the gifts of time, talent, and treasure they have within the

community to address those needs; three, that it's really not about them and their petty differences; and four, that God is faithful even when they themselves struggle to be so.<sup>1</sup>

The specific thing Paul addresses in today's passage is the splintering of the community into various factions, and the arguments which had become commonplace as a result. It seems some of the people were putting their various leaders up on pedestals. Perhaps they even elevated these leaders, named as Apollos, Cephas, and Paul himself, into a place that really only God belonged. That's the definition of idolatry: making a person or a thing into an object of worship, and then creating a cult-like atmosphere around them. For the recipient of this kind of adulation, it can feel like both a reward and a delusion: "Wow! They really love me! Aren't I great?!" As one scholar suggests, it can be, "wonderfully rewarding and self delusory to receive that level of support and adulation. It is worth striving for and working for - sustaining one's value as a god. It drives some people crazy and ruins their lives and the lives of many others. It turns the gospel upside down if we have to prove ourselves to ourselves or others like this. Worse still it means we are competing in the market of affection and there it cannot be in our interests that others succeed at our expense. It develops a mean spirit and almost inevitably created division. People in professions where affections can be won and lost, especially those with a public role, are particularly susceptible to such dangers. Clergy are among its best perpetrators. It is ultimately a form of abuse."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Lemmers Gross, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians 1:10-18." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-1-corinthians-110-18-6> [accessed January 20, 2026].

<sup>2</sup> William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year A Epistle Passages from the Lectionary: Epiphany 3." <https://billloader.com/AEpiphany3.htm> [accessed January 20, 2026].

Paul frames the challenge posed by the creation, and maintenance, of factions within the Church this way: "What I mean is each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to 'Apollos' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"(1 Cor 1:12-13, NRSV). The answer to all three of these rhetorical questions is, of course, a resounding NO. Paul's solution uses these questions to remind everyone that, because they are baptized members of the Body of Christ, they should "be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (1 Cor 1:10, NRSV).

In other words: "you weren't baptized in the name of your faction's leader. You WERE baptized in the name of Christ – so start acting like it!" Paul's tone reminds me of Herb Brooks, the coach of the 1980 Olympic hockey team, in the 2004 movie *Miracle*. In the early stages of the story, the players struggle to become a unified team. They can't quite put aside their individual loyalties and old arguments for long enough to get, and stay, focused on the goal of succeeding against the best teams in the world. In a particularly frustrating moment, Coach Brooks, played by Kurt Russell, yells at them, "When you pull on that jersey, you represent yourself AND your teammates. The name on the front is a [heck] of a lot more important than the name on the back!"<sup>3</sup>

Paul wasn't talking about a hockey team, or necessarily about the realities of everyday, non-church-related living in the economically and racially diverse boomtown that Corinth was in the first century. What he WAS talking about is keeping the main thing, the main thing. And that is how our faith in Christ should force us to look at the

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<sup>3</sup> *Miracle*, directed by Gavin O'Connor. 2004. Burbank, California: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, Inc., 2009. Blu-ray.

world, through the lens of the cross – a lens which is shaped by both its scandal and its insistence that what "The World" thinks of as power really isn't power at all.

Is it foolishness to insist on a worldview which demands loving one's neighbor?

Is it foolishness to point out that the divisions in the Corinthian Church get in the way of its ability to live into the faith it proclaims – which itself requires its members to put aside their differences for at least long enough to focus on something bigger than themselves?

Maybe. We don't know how the Corinthians received, or responded to, Paul calling them out for putting their loyalty to their human leaders ahead of their loyalty to Jesus, or for any of the other not-so-healthy things they did to provoke him to write in the first place. What we do know is that difference and division are the Achilles heel in all human communities, past and present, and that it takes a lot of hard work and intentionality about that work to be able to live with them as assets instead of things to be feared. As a parish, I think we do pretty well at this. It's chiefly because we are able to recognize, and then act on, how it's not all about us, and that the name on the front of the jersey is the one that matters most. And, this kind of unity, based around love of neighbor, is the biggest thing we can offer to the world as a model for living in the midst of our very troubling times. May the God who has given us this marvelous gift of community empower us to hold fast to all the good it has – and to continue to share it.