

Foolish

1 Corinthians 1:1-18 (select verses)

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Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus...He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

What 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.'

Has Christ been divided?

Was Paul crucified for you?

Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

For 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. For 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.

Have you ever accidentally opened a letter meant for someone else?

Torn open the envelope (or clicked open the email) and read the first few paragraphs before you realized it wasn't intended for you?

It's kind of hard to stop reading, isn't it?

You learn a lot.

First Corinthians is a letter that was meant for someone else, but it ended up in our Bibles.

Paul wrote it to the church that he founded around 51 CE. Paul planted a lot of churches...once they got off the ground he tended to move on to a new location. Paul had been gone from this church in Corinth for about two years before he felt the need to write the letter that we have as a part of our scripture.

Right out of the gate we learn a lot about what was going on in the community.

The church was quarrelling. Chloe's people were the tattle-tales. There was division within the body.

Not the kind of division that we tend to think of as it relates to differences between denominations, but divisions within the congregation itself; within family of faith.

First Church, Corinth was not a large congregation. Christianity was still a fledgling movement at the time. Scholars believe there might have been 200 Christians in the city, total – and that is probably generous.

Yet within the church that Paul founded there were factions; and – ostensibly, those factions organized around the personality of the leaders in the church.

Some people thought of themselves as Apollos' crowd.

You know how church people can be. They tend to favor one pastor over another. Apollos was known an intellectual. He was gifted in rhetoric. He preached without a note. Some people liked that. It appealed to the part of the church that was learned and appreciative of sophisticated thought.

Others in the church threw their lot in with Cephas. That's the name that Jesus gave the apostle Peter in John's gospel. Cephas' draw was that he had history. He could trace his story all the way back – from dropping his net and following Jesus along his journey to Jerusalem. For some people, that kind of legacy gives them a sense of comfort and confidence. They feel more grounded with a leader who is well connected.

Some other people in the church considered themselves still Paul's people. He was the founding pastor, after all, and the reason that they joined the church. He might not have been the most eloquent person in the city, but he believed what he preached and his life demonstrated his commitment to the message.

Still more people claimed that they belonged to Christ. Now, that almost sounds funny saying it that way – everybody in the church belongs to Christ – but for this group, they were sure that *they* were the ones who belonged...and the rest of congregation, well...they just couldn't say.

Beneath these factions was another reality.

The city of Corinth was a cosmopolitan place. It was a port city – south of Athens – that sat right between two well-travelled seas. Corinth saw all walks of life. Rich and poor, established and transient, professional types and wage earners. When Paul preached the gospel to these people, those who responded and were baptized into First Church, Corinth reflected the demographic diversity of the city.

So while the quarrels that Paul heard about tended to be between groups aligned with certain leaders, there was an undercurrent of social stratification...a seepage into the covenant community of the way these differences in background and education and race and class played themselves out in life beyond church on Sunday morning.

We don't have to read much of the letter to understand Paul's primary concern. He wants his church to avoid the kind of divisions that define the culture around them.

And that is why this letter is included in our Bibles; it is why it is considered part of God's word. Because as we read it – it becomes easy to see our story in theirs. And when we do, we find comfort and instruction in knowing that the issues we face are not isolated and specific to us. Rather, they are part of the common struggle of what it means to be Christian.

Frankly, it's nice to know – as we experience the reality of belonging together as a broad-minded and diverse congregation – that the church of Jesus Christ has been trying to figure out how to live together for a long time. Since the beginning, in fact.

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I had a strange thought this week as I pondered this scripture. I wonder what it would have been like for Paul to hire a consultant to advise him in his efforts at church planting. What common-sense lessons could a consultant help Paul learn from his experience at Corinth that might help him succeed in other efforts to start new congregations?

Perhaps the first lesson is not to go off and leave your congregation 18 months after their founding – like Paul did in Corinth. People need leadership, especially people who are new to the faith. A strong church is a pastor-centered church where people have someone where they can go when they have questions. Paul's focus was on spreading the gospel far and wide, but maybe he needed to spend more time in one place to make sure that the gospel also went deep. The fact is, it is not surprising that a community as diverse as the church in Corinth was squabbling. They lacked a central authority and instead were left to depend on one another.

Another lesson Paul must have learned was to anticipate the differences in the place where he would plant a new church and then employ strategies for dealing with these differences. Instead of starting one church, why not open a main campus with

a few satellite locations? You could tailor each location to the particular demographic needs – style of music, quality of leadership, and a different emphasis on what to preach and teach and do. The ability for people to choose how they want to experience the church helps the church grow because it gives people a chance to gather in like-minded and comfortable communities. Corinth was a case study in what can happen if you don't pay attention to the reality of difference. Think of the energy you could save from not having to fight against the entrenched stereotypes and assumptions we all have about people who are not like us.

Finally, Paul could have been stronger and more direct in his instruction about the way his congregation should interact with the world around them. It is much easier to shape a community if the only thing they are concerned about is what happens inside the walls of a church. It is easier to build a sense of connection among a people if you can create a mentality that it is "us against the world." Paul toes the line on this – both in his letters to Corinth and in his letter to the church he founded in Rome. "We are to be in the world, but not of the world," he said. But that still conveys a concern about the world. And study after study will show you that churches grow – and grow quickly – when people come to them to escape the world – not be sent back out into it.

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For 193 years we at First Church, Charlotte have been defying church consultants expectations.

We drive from all parts of the city – most of us past numerous churches – in order to worship on Sunday morning.

We each have our preferences for what we expect from the church – some are here because of our commitment to mission, others because of our excellence in worship and music, others because we need to belong to a community of care, still more because of the importance we give to forming children, youth, and adults as Christ's disciples.

We do not all think the same way. We vote for different people. Our passions are stoked by different things. We interpret – both the scriptures and the world around us – in different ways, coming to different conclusions.

We don't all have the same background. Some of us doctors and lawyers and bankers. Others haven't been to college. Some of us drive mini-vans with a multiplicity of car-seats, others can only get to church on days when we can take the bus.

We are intergenerational. We see the world from different perspectives defined by our experiences in the past and our comfort with the ways the present is leading into the future.

More and more, we choose to be here. In the center of a growing city...because we care about the world around us and believe our faith has something to offer to those who are hungry, or vulnerable, or aimless, or searching for truth and a relationship with Christ through the church.

There have been times in our history when we could have chosen the easy route. Moved somewhere where the people looked more like the face of the congregation at that point in time. Battened down the hatches and just focused on the world inside the gates of our campus. Pressed a divisive issue so hard that those who disagreed with us had no place to stand – making us more uniform in what the ways we believed.

But we didn't. And now, here we are – continuing to proclaim through speech and through action – what it means to be Christ's body sent into the world.

It is a world that is continuing to change. The Charlotte of today is not the Charlotte of 30 years ago, and the Charlotte of tomorrow will not be the Charlotte of today. As the city into which we carry out our ministry grows, so must we. As our city reflects the increasing diversity of the rest of the world, so must we. As its needs expand and the role for the church to be a participant in meeting those needs becomes clear, we must respond. And we can, because God has helped us be faithful for 193 years and God is not about to stop.

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When Paul makes his appeal to the church he founded in Corinth – a church that reflected the reality of just about every church that has ever been founded, he was not being naïve.

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

Paul is not advocating that the members of the church all think the same things and in the same ways.

What Paul wants is to make sure that we do not elevate our differences and our preferences and our visions for what the church should be over and above the reason that we are called together in the first place.

Paul asks the question - if we allow those differences to define us, then what does that say about Christ?

Has Christ been divided?

So why should we be divided?

In his letter – that is to the Church – both in Corinth and in Charlotte – Paul says that it is foolish to believe that we can be more than a collection of differences.

It is foolish to believe that the identities that define us in the world are overwhelmed by the identity we discover in the face of God's love through Jesus Christ – which is the purest and most complete expression of who we actually are.

It is foolish to believe that God could use a band of broken people like us to proclaim a message of redemption and justice and mercy to a world that seems helplessly divided.

But – Paul says – that is the foolishness of the cross.
And we must proclaim it.
And live it.

For therein lies God's power to save.

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