

July 19th, 2020

The First Sin of the Church

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

The Church's one foundation

Thus far in the book of 1 Corinthians Paul has been laying the foundation of the household of God—the Church. And what is that foundation? Christ. Eleven times in nine verses we saw that Christ is one foundation upon which the Church is built.

v.1 Paul is “an apostle of *Christ Jesus*”

v.2 The Church consists of those who are “sanctified in *Christ Jesus*” along with all who “call upon the name of our *Lord Jesus Christ*” who is “their *Lord* and ours”

v.3 It is from the Father and “the *Lord Jesus Christ*” that grace & peace come

v.4 God has given us all grace “in *Christ Jesus*” that is in our union with Him

v.5 “In every way [we] were enriched *in him*”

v.6 Therefore “the testimony about *Christ*” is confirmed in the Church

v.7 It is “for the revealing of our *Lord Jesus Christ*” that we anxiously wait

v.8 God will sustain us to the end, until “the day of our *Lord Jesus Christ*”
Why?

v.9 Because God is faithful and He has called us “into the fellowship of his Son, *Jesus Christ our Lord*.”

Paul's emphasis is unmistakable. Eleven times in nine verses, its Christ. It is **Christ** who is the firstborn from the dead; **Christ** who is the ruler of kings on earth; **Christ** who has freed us from our sins by his blood; Christ who is the Alpha and Omega—the first and the last; **Christ** who is the Living One—who died but who is alive for evermore. **Christ** who is the Head and glory of the Church.

Some animals are more equal than others

That's how Paul starts this letter. So then what is the first sin of the Church? It's when she starts chipping away at that foundation. And it always begins in the most subtle of ways. We all begin by accepting the basic Christian message that apart from Christ, we are nothing and worse than nothing: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become *worthless*; no one does good, not even one."¹ That's where we begin. Face down in the dust before a holy God. Christ out of His infinite compassion and love and pity raises us up with Him, regenerates us by His Holy Spirit, and makes us new creatures in Christ.

But something inevitably happens in our hearts. We are like those pigs in George Orwell's classic *Animal Farm*. Orwell wrote the allegory to show the absurdity of Marxism. What was the rule that allowed the pigs to rule over the rest of the animals? "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." That's the first sin of the Church. "Yes, yes, we are all equal sinners and saints before God. But some (like me) are more equal than others."

That's what's happening here in Corinth. They began to boast in the leaders that they chose to align themselves with: "I follow Paul...I follow Apollos." But this wasn't so much a statement about Paul or Apollos as it was a statement about themselves. It's the Christian way of showing that they were more equal than others. Dear congregation, let me just say, that we can be guilty of this in a thousand different ways. The problem of the Corinthian Church was not a problem exclusive to them. This is the problem of every Church in every age. It is the first sin of the Church.

The Big Idea...

The first sin of the Church is self-boasting, and this always divides Christ and destroys the gospel

¹ Romans 3:10-12

- ☆What Is the First Sin of the Church?
- ☆What Does This Sin Do to Christ?
- ☆What Does This Sin Do to the Gospel?

I. What Is the First Sin of the Church?

Paul's tender Christo-centric appeal

Please look with me at **v.10** “I appeal to you, brothers...” Consider how tender Paul is with them. He appeals to them. Although he has full apostolic authority to command, he comes alongside of them in a appeal—*parakaleō*—*para* means next to or besides, and *kaleō* means to call. He’s appealing to their hearts and their understanding. This Greek word is translated in other places as *urge*. **1 Corinthians 16:15** “Now I *urge* you, brothers...” Paul calls them brothers. Thirty-nine times in this letter he calls the Corinthian church his brothers.² The root word includes both brothers and sisters, it refers to the siblings of a family. In other words, Paul is having a family meeting with the Corinthians. If we don’t see the Church like this, we have already gone astray in our thinking. Yes we have flesh and blood families. But the real family—the ultimate family—that will never be dissolved is the Church of God.³

He makes his appeal, **v.10** “by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Though Paul is tender, he makes this appeal not in his own name. Church leaders, no matter who they are, can never demand obedience in their own name. That belongs to Roman Catholicism, a kind of implicit faith, where you must do what I say, because I say it. That’s not Paul’s method. He’s calling them to obey not out of respect to him, but out of respect to the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴

² Kim Riddlebarger, *The Lectio Continua: Expository Commentary on the New Testament: First Corinthians*, (Powder Springs, GA.,: Tolle Lege Press, 2013), pg. 17

³ Ephesians 4:14-15 “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named”

⁴ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, Reprint 2018), pg. 12

He will point out in **3:5** “What is Paul? [A] servant through whom you believed.” No Paul appeals to the Church in the name of Christ.

The tearing of schism

So what is his appeal? Halfway through **v.10** “that all of you *agree*.” Agree means to say the same thing. To profess the same opinion. Paul is not requiring uniformity but unity. It’s clear that Christians can have different opinions about things and still live in harmony. Paul says in **Philippians 3:15-16** “Let those of us who are mature think this way, and *if in anything you think otherwise*, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.” But the Corinthian problem was they they were starting to divide. Paul continues in **v.10** “I appeal to you, brothers...that there be no *divisions* among you.” The Greek word for division is where we get the word schism. A schism is literally a tear. It’s used in **Matthew 9:16** “No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch *tears* [schisms] away from the garment, and a worse *tear* [schism] is made.” The worst type of schism most of us have experienced in church splits. Church members are torn away from each other, like a garment is torn in two. Although schisms or divisions *can be* doctrinal in nature, often schisms happen because hearts have grown cold towards each other—suspicion sets in, love starts to evaporate, affections disappear.⁵ That how schism starts, it is “alienation of feeling, or inward separation.”⁶

The Apostle Paul and George Whitefield

Paul felt this schism in the Galatian Church. He said in **Galatians 4:15-16** “For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy...?” George Whitefield the 18th century evangelist during the Great Awakening experienced

⁵ “In Scripture, the word seems to denote a breach in charity, rather than a different doctrine.” (Webster’s 1828)

⁶ Hodge, pg. 12

this regularly. He made seven trips over the Atlantic Ocean by boat from England to America to preach the gospel. He would come and preach, and thousands would be converted, and the Church would fall in love with him. What happened? He would return to England. It would not be long before he received letters that rumors started spreading against him. Many in the visible church who owed their salvation instrumentally to Whitefield turned against him. Their affections were torn—they were *schismed*—away from him. So he would return and preach and teach and repair the breach, and affections would grow warm again. What was happening in England while he was in America? The same thing. Christians began to be torn away from him. The apostle Paul's experience was his. The very people who would have given him their own eyes, had become his enemies.

Our first principle: it is in your nature to be schismatic

So we arrive at our first principle: Church is it in your nature to be schismatic. You and I have a double nature—this is the doctrine of Romans 7. Your new nature created in Christ Jesus loves the brethren. But your old nature is always trying to tear you away, always trying to separate you, always trying to create a schism. It's automatic, it is the white noise that is always operating in the background. Your old nature looks and seeks for ways to tear apart from other Christians. It's never doing anything else. And the Church is especially in danger of schism today.⁷ The question of face masks, or our constitutional rights or racial injustice are all issues that our sinful nature will use to create schism. Add to that fact, that as a Church membership, we have

⁷ The Church in Corinth never got over this schismatic spirit. Clement wrote to the Corinthians in 96 or 97 A.D. saying this: "(47) Pick up the letter of the blessed apostle Paul. What was the primary thing he wrote to you, 'when he started preaching the gospel?' To be sure, under the Spirit's guidance, he wrote to you about himself and Cephas and Apollos, because even then you had formed cliques. Factiousness, however at that time was a less serious sin, since you were partisans of notable apostles and of a man they endorsed. But think now who they are who have led you astray and degraded your honorable and celebrated love of the brethren. It is disgraceful, exceedingly disgraceful, and unworthy of your Christian upbringing, to have it reported that because of one or two individuals the solid and ancient Corinthian Church is in revolt against its presbyters. This report, moreover, has reached not only us, but those who dissent from us as well. The result is that the Lord's name is being blasphemed because of your stupidity, and you are exposing yourselves to danger." *The Apostolic Fathers*, (Chicago, IL.: Moody Publishers, 2009 Edition), pg. 48-49

not yet been able to be altogether yet. Do you know how easy it is for our brothers and sisters who are at high risk to not feel loved? To not feel like they are a part of this Church? Do you know how easy it is for your own hearts to simply forget them? Don't you know this about yourself loved ones, that it is in your very nature to grow suspicious of each other? Don't you know how prone you are to schism? An immediate application would simply be this: look through your membership directory, and reach out to those whom you haven't seen, reaffirm your love for them, pray for them, ask how you can serve them. Don't allow a schism to set in.

Repair the tear

After Paul forbids schism, he gives us the positive remedy. The end of **v.10** “but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” The word *united* is borrowed from the imagery of repairing fishing nets. When Jesus called James and John to be His disciples in **Matthew 4:21** it says they were “in the boat with Zebedee their father, *mending* their nets.” They were mending or uniting their nets—the same word that Paul uses here. So Paul's first command in this letter, is that Christians be united, be mended, be repaired, be put back together again. How? How do we repair or unite the schism? End of **v.10** by being “...in the same mind and the same judgment.” Now this is essentially “the central theme of the entire letter.”⁸ Nearly everything from here until the end of chapter four follows from this. So let's take them one at a time.

The *same* mind

First, Paul tells us to “...be united in the *same mind*.” Don't you realize that we already have share the same mind? Look at **2:16**, end of the verse, “But *we* have *the mind* of Christ.” Because we are united to Christ, and therefore with each other, we already have the same mind. You have Christ's mind. How are we to exercise this mind? Paul tells us in **Philippians 2:4-9** “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the

⁸ Riddlebarger, pg.16-17

form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Do you see? Jesus didn’t consider Himself when He became obedient to death. He considered us. That is the same mind we are to have towards each other. That we are not to look only to our own interests but to the interests of others. Is that the mind that you have?

The *same* judgment

Second, Paul says to “be united...in the *same judgment*.” Judgment here means a view or opinion. We are to have same view or opinion or judgment. About what? Ourselves. Schisms happen because we have distorted opinions about *ourselves*. Think about going into the fun house at the fair, and you stand in front of those distortion mirrors. Now I like those mirrors because I am always taller than I really am. But that’s precisely the problem with our sinful nature. It is always distorting the truth about ourselves. It is always telling us that we are better than we actually are. What is the right judgment we should have about ourselves?⁹ Paul says in **1 Timothy 1:15** “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” Why did Paul say that? He is not only showing us how he judges himself—as the worst sinner—but how we should judge ourselves. Dear congregation, you know your own heart: the evil thoughts you think, the jealousies, the lusts, the pride, the anger, the blasphemies —you can’t see those things in the hearts of others. But you can see them in your own heart. Therefore you should have no problem saying that you are the worst sinner that you know. Is that the judgment you have?

⁹ Paul says **Romans 12:3** “I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober *judgment*...”

The official report

Now clearly the Corinthians were not united in the same mind and judgment. Paul says in v.11-12 “For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” Now we get to the precise nature of their schism and of their quarreling. We don't know anything about Chloe or her people. Perhaps they were members of the Church. Regardless of their connection, they had first-hand knowledge of the Corinthian's schism, so so they told Paul. Now unlike the book of Galatians, this doesn't seem at all to be a doctrinal issue. In Galatians, Paul was correcting the false doctrine that the Judaizers had secretly brought in, namely that in order to be saved, one had to believe in Christ + get circumcised + follow the ceremonial law. Here, the factions “I follow Paul...I follow Apollos” etc. didn't form because Paul or Apollos were teaching different doctrines. They taught the same gospel. Paul and Apollos and Cephas or Peter were co-laborers for the same Lord.

“I follow self”

No, these factions formed because the Corinthians were thinking like their surrounding culture. They aligned themselves with certain teachers because it brought them a certain social status.¹⁰ Who you belonged to determined your worth. Stephen Um puts it like this:

“In essence [the Corinthians were thinking], “I as the client will associate myself with a patron. The more elite, the more wealthy, the more upper class, the more honored my patron is, by my association with that patron I will also

¹⁰ Grant Macaskill says the this status seeking is another form of legalism: “legalism involves pursuing status in the eyes of fellow believers, whether consciously or not, and not just seeking to gain credit before God.” Grant Macaskill, *Living In Union With Christ: Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Baker Academic, 2019), pg. 9

be honored, I will also be elevated, I will also be viewed as someone who is extremely important, valuable, worthy, and praiseworthy.”¹¹

You see the Corinthians were not so much praising their favorite teachers, as they were praising themselves for picking the right teachers. In boasting in their heroes, they were really boasting in themselves.¹² It’s like the frat houses at university. The house you belong to determines how cool or uncool you are. But of course that’s the problem, everyone has to believe their house is the best. This is the nature of pride: it’s competitive.

The great sin

C.S. Lewis put’s it like this:

“...each person’s pride is in competition with every one else’s pride. It’s because I wanted to be the big noise at the party that I am so annoyed at someone else being the big noise...Now what you want to get clear is that Pride is *essentially* competitive—is competitive by it’s very nature. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest.”¹³

¹¹ Stephen T. Um, *1 Corinthians: The WORD of the CROSS, Preaching the Word*, Series Editor R. Kent Hughes, (Wheaton, IL.,: Crossway, 2015), pg. 26

¹² It’s apparent this is what their sin was. Paul uses this very word as the conclusion to his argument in 1:29 “..so that no human being[d] might boast in the presence of God” and again in v.31 “...so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

¹³ C.S. Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, (New York, NY.,: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), pg. 69

No one finds pleasure in saying “All animals are equal.” We find pleasure in believing that some animals are more equal than others, and that we are among them.

What about those who say “I follow Christ”

Part of the difficulty in this passage is the last phrase that Paul mentions. In v.12 He says that there are some who say “I follow Christ.” Isn’t this the correct view?¹⁴ Aren’t we to follow Christ? Of course. However, Paul put this in the list as an example of quarreling, as an example of schism. How? Kim Riddlebarger explains it like this: “Some in the church were offended by the factionalism and reacting against it [say], “We follow no man, we follow only Christ,” in effect, forming another faction based upon not joining in the other factions.”¹⁵ It is the anti-faction faction. Our boasting knows no bounds. We can even use Christ as a means to show that we are better than other people.

Our second principle: you just are a self-boaster

This brings us to our second principle: you just do boast in yourself. Dear Christian, you are a self-boaster. “If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.”¹⁶ This is the first sin of the Church, of the Christian. Before any sin ever manifests itself, this sin is always lurking in the heart. It was the sin of the twelve disciples. Even though they saw Jesus in the flesh, heard His teaching, saw His miracles, felt His compassion, they still saw each other as competitors in the arena. **Luke 9:46** “An argument arose among

¹⁴ There are some commentators who essentially say that this last group got it right. Either because Paul is voicing it as his own position in contradistinction to the previous three [Roy E. Ciampa & Brian S. Rosner, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The First Letter to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), pg. 80-82]. Calvin asks “Was this, too, worthy, of blame? I answer, that in this way he shows more fully what unseemly consequences result from those depraved affections, when we give ourselves up to men, as in that case Christ must be acknowledged merely in part, and the pious have no alternative left them, but to separate themselves from others, if they would not renounce Christ.” [John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries Vol. XXI*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: BakerBooks, 2009), pg. 218, pg. 66]

¹⁵ Riddlebarger, pg. 20

¹⁶ Lewis, pg. 72

them as to which of them was the greatest.” Their closeness to Christ didn’t prevent their boasting. In **3 John 1:9**, John writes of a pastor who is guilty of this: “I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority.” This type of self-boasting can follow us even into prayer. The Pharisee prayed to God in **Luke 18:11-12** “‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ How insidious. He speaks of grace, and He blesses God, and yet He is congratulating himself of not being like other men. And if you think that doesn’t apply to you, don’t you see you are already guilty of it? “God I thank you that I’m not like that proud Pharisee, full of hypocrisy, and self-conceit. I pray only with the utmost humility.” This is our sin brothers and sisters, and while we are in the flesh it is inescapable.

We must ask here, since Paul condemns party spirit: is it wrong for a Christian to claim to be a Calvinist, or a Baptist, or to say they belong to a particular denomination, or that they like some famous preacher? Is that wrong? Don’t you see, in asking that question, we must also ask is it wrong to claim that “I follow Christ?” All of these sayings were condemned. Not because it’s wrong to like a certain teacher, or to believe a certain theological system. That is not what is in view here. What Paul condemns here is using our speech or actions to one-up each other. That is not how the Church is supposed to behave. We ought to have left that behind in the world. That is how the world operates. That was Paul’s whole point in the introduction. Christian you are in an entirely different position than the world is. Why would you then operate according to those elemental spirits of the world?¹⁷ Examine yourself. Are you bringing that party spirit into the Church? In what ways do you view yourself better than other Christians? In what ways are you boasting? That’s the first sin of the Church—self-boasting.

¹⁷ Colossians 2:20

II. What Does This Sin Do to Christ?

Paul now draws out what this particular sin does to our Lord Jesus Christ. Please look with me at v.13. Paul asks “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Three questions that provide us with three consequences that directly attack Jesus when we engage in self boasting.

First consequence: Boasting mutilates our union with Christ

Paul asks: “Is Christ divided?” It is an absolute absurd question. The Greek word means separated into parts, or cut into pieces. Can Christ be cut into pieces? Why does Paul go here first? Well because He has already taught us about the Church’s union with Christ. We are mystically and spiritually united to Christ.¹⁸ The metaphor that Paul uses again and again is that Christ is our head, and we are His body. **1 Corinthians 12:12-13** “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, *so it is with Christ*. For in one Spirit *we were all baptized into one body*—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit...[v.27] Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” No one person can say they are the body of Christ. They can only say they are a body member of Christ—the individual is not the whole body. Only together does the Church comprise of the whole body. Therefore when he asks “Is Christ divided” he’s showing the absurdity of schisms. What part of Christ do you want for yourself? His death or His resurrection? His omnipresence or His goodness? It’s absurd. But by engaging in schism, that is what we are doing with His body. In dividing from each other, the Church is trying to divide Christ Himself.¹⁹ Dear congregation, please burn this verse into your head. Schism and the self-

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 6:17 “But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.” Meaning, the whole Church has become one spirit with Him. How can that be cut into pieces?

¹⁹ “As there can be but one Christ, the church cannot be divided...as the head is one so are the members.” Hodge, pg.17

boasting that causes it is attempting to mutilate Christ.²⁰ How we commune with one another as a local church either tells the truth or lies about our union with Jesus.

Second consequence: Boasting assumes a surrogate savior

Paul asks his second question, halfway through v.13 “Was Paul crucified for you?” No. Then why do you boast in following *him*? “Paul did not encourage the party spirit, even among those who supported him.”²¹ He is showing us that *whatever we boast in* becomes a substitute or surrogate savior. Stephen Um says here

“This is the reason we latch on to causes. They become our surrogate savior. We become fierce evangelists for political parties, diets, methods of parenting and education etc. These things give us a sense of identity and purpose insofar as they make us different or distinct from other people.”²²

Don’t you see how Paul is showing us that a boast is never merely a boast. There is no such thing as an innocent boast. Boasting always shows that there is something much deeper going on in our hearts. Boasting shows that you have a surrogate savior.²³

Third consequence: Boasting lies about lordship

Paul asks his final question at the end of v.13 “Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” One of the important accomplishments of baptism is that it

²⁰ “Has Christ been divided? This is only too true. The question is effectively a castigation of the partisan spirit in Corinth. Their behavior has led to the unthinkable! Paul uses the same shock tactics using the question in 6:15 “Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute?” Ciampa & Rosner, pg. 82

²¹ Reformed Heritage Study Bible Online

²² Um, pg. 26

²³ Do you have a surrogate savior? Ask yourself: Whose opinion most counts to you? Whose approval do you most want? What achievement are you most hoping for in this life? What makes you feel superior to other people? Have any of these things been crucified for you?

publicly declares Christ is Lord over all, that all authority has been given to Him in Heaven and on Earth, and that He is the only source of forgiveness and reconciliation to God. Listen to how Jesus puts it in **Matthew 28:19-20** “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” To be baptized in any other name implies that it is another who has all authority, another who is the source of life. Therefore it would be to rob Christ of His Lordship—His rightful rule over all the Church. Paul is saying that when we boast, we are giving our allegiance to another. Whatever that thing is, has effectively become lord in our life. It is like being baptized in it’s name.

The consequences all fall on Christ

Those are the three consequences of boasting: it mutilates our union with Christ, it assumes a surrogate savior, and it lies about the Lordship of Christ. Dear congregation don’t you see how it is Jesus Christ who is most dishonored when schisms take place? Paul has not even spoken about how this will affect the Church yet. That will come later. His first concern is Christ. This is always the first concern of the Bible. When David sinned against Bathsheba and Urriah—adultery and murder—was God’s first concern Bathseba and Urriah? No—though God truly loved them—God’s first concern was how David’s sin affected God. He told David in **2 Samuel 12:14** “By this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord.” Paul tells the Jews something similar in **Romans 2:24** who were breaking God’s commandments. He says “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” Don’t you see? At the center of this section, Paul’s claim is that when the Church engages in this behavior, it renders Christ a dismembered, partial savior who has no authority.²⁴ How is that type of Christ to receive honor? How is the world to come under conviction by the Christ of that local Church? It is absolutely vital that we see that the sins of any

²⁴ “All party spirit is disloyalty to Christ” Thomas Charles Edwards, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Published by Forgotten Books 2012, Originally Published 1885), pg. 21

local Church are not private sins, they have cosmic consequences. Our Church life together will either bring honor to Christ or no.

III. What Does This Sin Do to the Gospel?

The inferiority and importance of baptism

It's not just the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ that this sin negatively effects, it is His whole work in the gospel. Let's look at **v.14-16**, he says "I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)" What would cause Paul to thank God that he baptized so few people? Because hardly anyone could claim a special connection to Paul. Apparently that was part of the problem in Corinth—where "baptized individuals formed and illegitimate connection to the person who baptized them."²⁵

Paul is not degrading the ordinance of baptism. In fact the opposite. By mentioning here, there is an importance that he attaches to it. They were obviously practicing it according to the command of Jesus gave in the great commission (**Matthew 28:19**). However, though baptism is important, and it is sinful to disobey it or to neglect it, is inferior to the preaching of the gospel. "Teaching always holds the first place"²⁶ because truth always stands above external ceremony. In fact, apostasy always happens when the Church makes ceremony and form more important than the preaching of the truth. That's why Paul can say what he says in the beginning of **v.17** "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel..."

²⁵ Riddlebarger, pg. 21

²⁶ Calvin, pg. 72

Corinthian values

Now what's vital to see here is the flow of Paul's argument. He sets aside the question of factions and schisms, and he doesn't pick it up again until chapter three. Here Paul begins to argue against those "values which lie behind"²⁷ the factions. The Corinthians like all cultures had certain cultural values. Because Corinth was deeply embedded in the tradition of Greek philosophy and rhetoric, the Corinthians prized eloquent speech. Who was the best spin doctor? Who could turn a phrase better than the next man? That's what they loved—sophistry.²⁸ They valued the skillful use of human argumentation—not so much to convey truth, but to win an argument and to sound good doing it. This is part of the reason why there was an anti-Paul faction within Corinth. When compared to Apollos, Paul was seen as his inferior because of his not playing by the rules of sophistry. Apollos on the other hand, fit more in their value system. **Acts 18:24** tells us that Apollos "...was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures." Now God-willing we will see next week that eloquence considered by itself was not problem. Apollos was not guilty of compromising the gospel.

How sophistry guts the gospel

The root problem in Corinth was that these factions were prizing the medium above the message. They prized how the truth was delivered more than the truth itself. They prized the form above the substance. In other words, what they loved was not what their teachers were saying, but how they were saying it. Paul absolutely rejected this type of sophistry. Why? Because it gutted the gospel of its power. That's what this sin does against the gospel: it empties it. Look at **v.17** "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom [σοφία sophia—sophistry] lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." How? Why is the gospel emptied of its power with sophistry? What does sophistry aim at? Human applause. The

²⁷ Ciampa & Rosner, pg. 87

²⁸ Where we get the word "sophistication"

sophist aims at receiving glory from the crowds for his “neatly packaged eloquence and wit.”²⁹ “Preaching which softens...or “spices up” the cross, nullifies the power of the cross [because it] draws people to the preacher, not to the Savior.”³⁰ Beloved how can you soften the cross? How can you make the cross eloquent? That’s like asking how can you make going to the electric chair look like a beautiful thing?

The gospel necessary includes self-despair

Don’t you see? The gospel necessarily includes a despairing of self. What have you heard about yourselves this morning?

You’ve heard that you are inherently schismatic. That you are naturally suspicious of other Christians, that your affections naturally grow cold and dull and lifeless towards them.

You’ve heard that you are the worst person that you know.

You’ve heard that you love to boast in yourself, secretly or publicly. That really at the heart of your person, you are a Pharisee.

In short you’ve heard that you are what the Bible calls a sinner. Listen to **Romans 3:10-12** again, but this time listen to it with “you” in the place of all the pronouns. “*You* are not righteous, *you* have not understood; *you* have not sought for God. *You* have turned aside; *you* have become *worthless*; *you* have not done good.” And the Bible says there is no hope of self-reformation. There’s nothing you can do about your condition. How can that message be made eloquent? It can’t be. It’s why the cross is called a stumbling block and an offense. The cross of Christ is offensive to the natural mind because it says that you and I are so bad that it took the death of the Son of God to deliver us. The cross tells us the worst things about us. It absolutely removes all our ability to boast.

²⁹ Ciampa & Rosner, pg. 86

³⁰ Riddlebarger, pg. 22

The gospel is the power of God

But, dear congregation, the cross tells us all the most wonderful things about the Lord Jesus Christ. It gives us every reason to boast in Him.

The cross tells us that though we could never earn our salvation, God gave it to us as a free gift through faith alone. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (**Ephesians 2:8-9**)

The cross tells us that Jesus didn’t wait for us to start living right before He saved us. “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (**Romans 5:8**).

The cross tells us that all of our offenses against God have been completely swallowed up, never to be brought up against us again. “If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (**1 John 2:1-2**)

The cross tells us that Christ will never forget about us or neglect us, or be careless with us. “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands” (**Isaiah 49:15-16**)

The cross guarantees that we will be brought to God to live with Him forever. “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (**1 Peter 3:18**).

The cross secures all boasting for the Lord alone “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (**1 Corinthians 1:31**).

Do you see? That's where the power of the gospel is, not in eloquent words, not in human applause. But in human despair. In the Christ who bore the wrath of God for our sins, who was buried with the wicked, and who rose triumphantly from the grave on the third day. All joy and peace and hope and comfort is found there, in Him. Not in your perceived goodness over your neighbor. But in Christ. "In Him you have been made complete" (**Colossians 2:10**).

To the unbeliever

If you are not yet a Christian, I would ask you why not? Aren't you sick of the slavery of trying to prove yourself in this world? You'll never be good enough. Your soul requires perfection. God requires perfection. And you can never have that outside of the Lord Jesus Christ. Stop running away from the Savior my friend. Stop boasting in yourself. Begin to boast in Him. The Scripture promises that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."³¹

³¹ Romans 10:13