

# Third Sunday after the Epiphany – Epistle

**Belonging To Christ**

**I Corinthians 1:10-18**

**Third Sunday after Epiphany**

**Analysis by Bruce T. Martin**

I Corinthians 1:10 Now 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 Stephanus; 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.

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**DIAGNOSIS: Belonging Is Everything!**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** – *Belonging to*

## *Others*

Belonging has its downside. Everything depends on the one to whom we belong. Let the truth be told: depending on or being associated with any human being is fundamentally risky, whether that person is friend or foe, supervisor or spouse, president or priest. Although necessary to human community and nurture, belonging to another or a group of others necessarily builds walls against those who do not belong. For the Corinthian believers (or, believers), “baptism” signaled a permanent belonging, that is, an ownership “in the name of \_\_\_\_\_” (v. 15). Like those before us, for the purpose of belonging we tend to fill-in-the-blank with our favorite pastor or saint. The problem is that a confusion of Paul or Apollos or Cephas (v. 12), or whomever, with Christ, only creates “divisions” of belonging, both of “mind” and of “purpose” among us (v. 10).

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *Belonging to Self*

Belonging to another human being, whether by apparent choice or not, is really an extension of one’s own self-expression, or longing for self-actualization: self-love, eros. Ironically, because eros is a depending on, or believing in, oneself (or one’s own excellent choices) for everything—including salvation—each of us is not only “divided” within ourselves, fragmented against ourselves, but completely unable to escape the conundrum that our pretty self-expressions cannot save us from our pretty self-expressions! In terms of modern psychology: positive thinking is merely thinking in circles, for all the positives in the world (“eloquent wisdom,” v. 17) will never find expression, let alone salvation, in the crucifixion of God-in-Christ (v. 18).

## **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** – *Ceasing to Belong*

Theologically: belonging to self and to others, while necessary, is a slow but decisive “perishing” (v. 18), finally ceasing to

belong at all (Paul describes it as “to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God,” 1:28-29). We are dead to everything near and dear; dead especially to God who holds us responsible for our erotic “foolishness” (v. 18). But we cannot know this about ourselves; it must be “proclaimed” as an otherwise unknowable “message,” not as a thought-experiment but as the necessary condition for an historical event: “the cross of Christ” (vv. 17-18; see also 4:20). Without belonging to Christ, we are doomed to the circularity of our own belongings. Worse, we are condemned before the very God who, in the divine wisdom, placed us in such foolishness to begin with (by its biblical name, “sin”), the only atonement being “the cross” (v. 18). For, who can save us from God except God?

## **PROGNOSIS: Belonging to Christ is Everything!**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *Belonging to Christ*

The “power” of the cross is that God has accomplished in Jesus what only God could conceive: a new creation (2:9). Those who belong to the crucified Christ (“we who are being saved,” v. 18) belong also to the resurrection of the dead (15:47-49). With astonishing comprehensiveness, “the message about the cross” (v. 18) showers upon us Christ-belongers grace-gift upon grace-gift (1:5-8; see 2:12), withholding nothing from the community of those who are “called into the fellowship of God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1:9). Salvation is no mere thing; it is quite literally everything!

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** – *Christ Belonging to Us*

Therefore, having received the grace-gifts of salvation, we are enabled for the first time to “boast in the Lord . . . and him crucified” (1:31, 2:2). By such “faith” (2:5) we have become

“spiritual beings” (2:15), possessed by the Spirit of God (2:12) and having “the mind of Christ” (2:16). No longer do we long to belong to others, nor even to self, but to God-in-Christ. What we could not choose, God has chosen for us. Whatever self-expressions we could muster have died in Christ. Now, Christ lives in us. As newly minted spiritual beings, we are one body of Christ united in one Spirit (12:12-13). By the indwelling of Christ, we are no longer an “I” but always a “we.”

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Belonging to Others***

Paul’s “brothers and sisters” (vv. 10-11) cannot now justify belonging to Paul or to Apollos or to Cephas; their only “justification” (1:30) now is belonging to Christ himself who belongs to all of us. So then, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas “baptized” anyone, all are baptized in the name of Christ alone. Paul’s strange assertion, that “Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel” (1:17), makes the vital distinction between baptism with water only (which belongs to the old creation) and baptism in the name of Christ (which belongs to the new creation). True baptism is by water and the Word (Luther’s term for “proclamation of the gospel”) received in faith through the community of Christ-belongers (see 10:16-17). By such a baptism, we are “united in the same mind and the same purpose” as Christ himself (v. 10), in the one Spirit (see 12:4ff), in order that “godly love” (agape, not eros) may come into being among us. “Follow the way of love” (14:1), Paul concludes, now freely belonging to others in “imitation of Christ” (11:1).