Foolish belonging: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

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One Sunday soon, I'll have news to share with my congregation. I'll announce, with great fanfare, my denomination's latest partnership agreement with another denomination. Or I'll share the latest vote on full communion. And then I'll look out into the pews and see members showing polite interest at best, or yawning. Church leaders may be disappointed in my congregation's reaction to groundbreaking news in the ecumenical movement. But they need to understand my congregation.

Most of our members have been up and down the streets of New Haven, and have visited all the churches that we're "in partnership with." Then they chose a church, and landed in one that just happens to be in a denomination called the United Church of Christ.

Like most Americans, our members shop the religious landscape with little denominational brand loyalty, or perhaps just enough to make brand X their first stop before they go elsewhere. Certainly there are those who remember the days when Catholics and Protestants lived separate lives. Some have spent time in churches that did not recognize their baptism and demanded that they be baptized again. These Christians listen with interest to any news of reconciliation.

Yet the news that some mainline Protestants have decided to recognize one another's communion table *underwhelms* those who sit in our pluralistic pews. They've been bouncing around in their own private ecumenical movements for years, attending a wedding here and a baptism there. They have a growing sense that denominational divisions are a thing of the past.

Paul writes to the church in Corinth, "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 Cephas’ or ‘I belong to Christ.” I find myself longing for that sort of passionate debate in this postmodern world. I am humbled by the dangers faced by Christians in other parts of the world, in places where a call from Christ is considered more than a personal preference.

In the United States, it is rare to hear someone define herself as belonging to someone else. Here, we belong to ourselves. To belong to another smacks of subservience, or low self-esteem. “I am my own person,” is our rallying cry. But it’s a thin definition of worth. We share the right feelings, but we are stingier about sharing our money. In our culture’s philosophical scheme, everyone deserves to love himself, but not everyone deserves health care.

With two children in public school, I regularly receive xeroxed missives on how to improve my parenting. These handy sheets will offer “ten tips for raising your child’s self-esteem,” or “three shortcuts to quality family time.” According to our culture, my job as a parent is to defend against that pernicious evil that leads to everything from drug abuse to eating disorders to jail time: low self-esteem. I am not instructed to tell my children that they belong to anyone other than themselves. This would lead to low self-worth.

Paul struggles with his self-worth. He gets frustrated, and wonders why his leadership unravels as soon as he leaves a town. Wandering from place to place, trying to build community through letter writing, taking the pulse of the church from prison or faraway lands, he sometimes gets it wrong. I can see him pulling his hair as he writes, wondering what he should do next, wondering if he should say it in a different way.

When Paul says, “I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius . . .” is this merely a theological point, or a moment of frightening frustration, a crisis in leadership?

“You guys are nuts. I didn’t baptize any of you. OK, maybe a few of you at Stephanus’s place. But if I did, I’ve put it out of my mind.”

In today’s world, Paul would be seen as needing affirmation. In a group therapy setting, other ministers involved in challenging church starts would offer Paul some positive reinforcement. Maybe we’d offer Paul an interim, or a sabbatical. But Paul does not appear to need any of these things. Instead, his theology pulls him through the crisis.

“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.” Paul refuses to be the hero of his own story, the spiritual athlete who saves the day with his wisdom. He leans on God’s power, not his own, as he reminds the church that the world will not ultimately define them. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are saved it is the power of God.”

Paul refuses to allow others to belong to him, and in so doing he refuses to belong to himself. God’s story does not begin or end with him, but in Christ. Paul turns us away from our own pleasure and comfort to the cross. In a world in which we are supposed to belong only to ourselves, Paul reminds us of a time when the church made harder claims.

He points us to Christ who will not be divided, and to a small church community worth fighting for.