

1 Corinthians 1:10-17 Deeper Dive

Why Paul starts here

Paul could have begun 1 Corinthians with sexual ethics (ch. 5-6), lawsuits (ch. 6), or worship chaos (ch. 11-14). He starts with **factions** because division isn't just one sin among many; it's a *structural* problem that distorts everything else. If the church's shared identity fractures, every other issue becomes harder to address because the community no longer knows what "we" means.

Scholars who read Paul with an eye to "community formation" often highlight that Paul's letters are not abstract theology first and ethics second. They are pastoral theology aimed at forming a people whose life together embodies the gospel.

The historical and social world behind the text

Corinth's "status air"

Corinth was a Roman colony and a commercial hub. Ancient Mediterranean cities ran on **honor/shame**, patronage networks, and public competition for recognition. David deSilva's work on honor/shame and social power dynamics is especially useful here: in a status-driven world, communities tend to sort themselves around the "most impressive" patrons, speakers, or philosophical schools.

That matters because "party spirit" in Corinth likely wasn't only theological, it was *social*. Different house-church gatherings in the city may have been connected to different patrons, teachers, or rhetorical tastes. The language of "following" can easily mimic how students attached themselves to philosophers or how clients attached themselves to patrons.

Why "eloquence" is in the background (v. 17)

Paul's comment about "eloquent wisdom" (literally "wisdom of word") isn't a random aside. Corinth valued skilled rhetoric. Paul is pushing back against a cultural instinct: **to treat the gospel like another wisdom school**, where you pick the teacher you like best, and your identity becomes "I'm with him."

A close reading of the Greek

1) "I appeal to you..." (v. 10)

Paul begins with **parakalō** (“I appeal / urge / exhort”). This verb can carry pastoral warmth: encouragement and warning. He’s not detached; he’s trying to *pull them back from a cliff*.

He appeals “**through the name** of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*dia tou onomatos*). “Name” in biblical thought isn’t a label; it represents **identity and authority**. Paul is saying: the basis of this appeal isn’t “my preference” or “my apostolic ego,” but **the shared Lordship of Jesus**.

2) “That you all say the same thing” (v. 10)

The phrase **to auto legete pantes** is often misunderstood. Paul isn’t demanding robotic sameness. In context he clarifies the target: “no divisions... united in the same mind and judgment.” It’s closer to: *stop speaking in rival slogans; speak as one community with one center*.

3) “Divisions” = *schismata* (v. 10)

Schismata means “rips/tears.” It’s vivid, and it prepares for Paul’s later “body” language (1 Cor 12). The church is not a voluntary club of like-minded consumers; it is a **single reality** that can be torn.

Division is not merely interpersonal conflict; it is a symbolic assault on the unity Christ creates.

4) “United” = *katērtismenoi* (v. 10)

Paul wants them to be **katērtismenoi** (from *katartizō*). The word is used for “mending” nets, repairing what is broken, setting a bone, restoring something to proper condition. The image fits *schismata*: don’t keep tearing; **repair**.

This is “unity” as *healing work*, not “unity” as denial of differences.

5) “Quarrels” = *erides* (v. 11)

Erides are contentions/strifes, an ongoing relational posture, not just one disagreement. Paul is diagnosing a culture of rivalry.

6) The slogans (v. 12)

The repeated “**egō eimi**” (“I am of...”) signals identity formation. This isn’t “I appreciate Paul.” It’s “I belong to Paul’s camp.” It’s a belonging claim.

The “I am of Christ” slogan is fascinating: it may represent a group claiming to be above leadership, or it may be another faction using Jesus’ name as a trump card. Either way, the irony is sharp: even “Christ” can be used **as a party badge** rather than a shared center.

7) “Has Christ been divided?” (v. 13)

The verb **memeristai** (perfect passive) can be rendered “has been divided/portion-distributed.” Paul’s logic is almost shocking: if you divide the church into camps, you are acting as though **Christ himself can be parceled out**. You’re treating Christ like a resource you can slice up... “my portion of Christ versus yours.”

8) “Baptized into the name” (v. 13)

The phrase **eis to onoma** (“into the name”) implies transfer of allegiance and identity. Compare the NT’s broader pattern:

- Baptized **into Christ** (Gal 3:27)
- Baptized **into his death** (Rom 6:3)
- Israel “baptized into Moses” (1 Cor 10:2– note how “into” signals leadership/allegiance)

Paul’s point is not primarily about who performed the baptism; it’s about **who owns the baptismal identity**. The church is tempted to treat baptism like a celebrity signature. Paul says: you don’t belong to the baptizer; you belong to the Crucified.

9) “Wisdom of word... empty the cross” (v. 17)

Paul warns against preaching the gospel **en sophia logou** (“in wisdom of word”) so that the cross is not **kenōthē** (“emptied / made void”). That verb comes from *kenoō* which means to empty, nullify, drain of power.

Intertextually, this resonates with the famous “self-emptying” language in Philippians 2 (same verb family). The irony is biting: Christ “empties himself” in humble obedience; Corinth is in danger of “emptying the cross” by turning it into a platform for status performance.

Michael Gorman’s “cruciformity” framework fits tightly here: the cross isn’t merely the mechanism of salvation; it is the **pattern** that must shape Christian community. If the church’s life together is not cruciform, ie, humble, self-giving, status-downward, then the cross has been “emptied” in practice, even if it is affirmed in doctrine.

Paul’s theology beneath the argument

The cross creates a new kind of unity

Paul’s rhetorical questions (v. 13) move from **Christ** → **cross** → **baptism**. That sequence matters:

1. **Christ** is the shared Lord.
2. The **cross** is the defining center of Christian identity.
3. **Baptism** is the communal marker of belonging.

N.T. Wright often emphasizes that Paul's gospel is not simply "how I get saved," but the announcement that **Jesus is Lord** and that God is creating a renewed people through him. This paragraph is a micro-version of that: if Jesus is Lord, no other allegiance can function as the church's primary identity.

Unity isn't optional; it's part of the gospel's truth

In Paul, "division" is not just a social failure, it's a theological contradiction. The church is meant to be a public sign of God's reconciling work in Christ. When that sign fractures, the church's message becomes harder to believe, because the community's life no longer matches its proclamation.

Scot McKnight's church emphasis dovetails here: the local church is not a delivery system for religious goods; it is the **community where the gospel becomes visible**. Corinth's factions make the gospel look like one more marketplace product where you choose your brand.

Intertextual connections for deeper reflection

1) John 17 (Jesus' prayer for unity)

Jesus prays for unity "so that the world may believe." Paul's pastoral urgency fits that same missional logic: disunity isn't just unpleasant; it undermines witness.

2) 1 Corinthians 3:21-23 (Paul's later "reset")

Later Paul says: "All things are yours... and you are Christ's." That's the antidote to factionalism: stop clutching leaders as possessions; recognize that leaders are gifts, and **you belong to Christ**.

3) 1 Corinthians 12 (body theology)

The *schismata* imagery in 1:10 anticipates the "one body, many parts" argument. Paul's vision is consistent across the letter: difference is not the enemy; rivalry is.

4) Galatians 3:27-28 (baptismal identity)

Baptism collapses the rival identity markers that the world uses to rank people. Corinth rebuilds ranking systems (speaker preference, status, rhetorical sophistication). Paul says baptism should have dismantled those.

5) Philippians 2:1-11 (cross-shaped community)

Philippians provides a lens: unity comes through humility, and humility is grounded in the Messiah's downward path. This is "cruciformity" in narrative form.

Interpretive questions for deeper study

1. In your setting, what are the modern equivalents of “I am of Paul / Apollos / Cephas”? (Preaching style? theological tribe? online influencer? political identity? generational preference?)
2. Where do you see Corinth’s “status air” at work in church life, ie, how people signal belonging, maturity, or superiority?
3. How does remembering baptism as “into the name” change the way you evaluate disagreement and preference?
4. What would it look like for your church’s unity to be explicitly **cross-shaped** (status-downward) rather than merely “peacekeeping” (conflict-avoidant)?
5. Where might “wisdom of word” (impressiveness, polish, rhetorical dominance) be subtly “emptying the cross” in your context?

A simple “deep reflection” practice

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 slowly twice.

- First time: underline identity language (“I am of...,” “name,” “baptized”).
- Second time: circle cross language (“crucified,” “cross,” “power”).

Then pray:

“Lord Jesus, keep your cross at the center of how we talk, disagree, and belong.”