

“To Whom Do We Belong?”

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1 Corinthians 1:10-18

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¹⁰Now 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 Stephanas; 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.

Daniel Kahneman, (a Nobel Prize winner in Economics) says in his wonderful book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, that there is a compelling drama going on in our minds, a filmlike plot between two main characters with twists, dramas and tensions. These two characters are the ***impulsive, automatic, intuitive System 1***, and the ***thoughtful, deliberate, calculating System 2***. As they play off against each other, their interactions determine how we think, make judgments and decisions, and act.

System 1 is the part of our brain that operates intuitively and suddenly, often without our conscious control. You can experience this system at work when you hear a very loud and unexpected sound. *What do we do?* You probably immediately and automatically shift your attention toward the sound. That’s System 1.

This system is a legacy of our *evolutionary past*: there are inherent survival advantages in being able to make such rapid actions and judgments.

System 2 is what we think of when we visualize the part of the brain responsible for our individual decision-making, reasoning, and beliefs. It deals with conscious

activities of the mind such as self-control, choices and more deliberate focus of attention.

For instance, imagine you're looking for a woman in a crowd. Your mind deliberately focuses on the task: it recalls characteristics of the person and anything that would help locate her. This focus helps eliminate potential distractions, and you barely notice other people in the crowd. If you maintain this focused attention, you might spot her within a matter of minutes, whereas if you're distracted and lose focus, you'll have trouble finding her.

The point is that the relationship between these two systems determines how we behave.

To see how the two systems work, try solving this famous *bat-and-ball* problem:

A bat and ball cost \$1.10. The bat costs one dollar more than the ball. *How much does the ball cost?*

The price that most likely came to your mind, 10 cents, is the result of the intuitive and automatic *System 1*, and it's wrong! Take a second and do the math now.

Do you see the mistake? The correct answer is 5 cents.

What happened was that your *impulsive* System 1 took control and automatically answered by relying on *intuition*. But it answered *too fast*.

The issue the bat and ball problem exposes is our *innate mental laziness*. When we use our brain, we tend to use the *minimum* amount of energy possible for each task. This is known as the *law of least effort*. Because checking the answer with *System 2* would use *more energy*, our mind won't do it when it thinks it can just get by with *System 1*.

I share this with you because *System 1 thinking* is the primary source of conflict and misunderstanding between people because the *snap judgments* we make when our brains are operating on *auto-pilot* are so frequently wrong. Our mind's tendency to *oversimplify things* without sufficient information often leads to judgment. Add to this *confirmation bias*, which is the tendency for people to *agree*

with information that supports their previously held beliefs, and it is easy to see how we often leap to the wrong conclusions.¹

And, interestingly, we see all of these short-sided *thinking dynamics* [System 1] on broad display in the church at Corinth.

You see, Corinth was the only city in which Paul's communities contained *significant class divisions* between the wealthy and powerful and ordinary people. And this tension between different classes of people within the church can be explained (in part) by *architecture*—specifically, the relationship between *urban villas* and *shops*.

Urban Villas were often located on major streets in cities, and their *ground floors* facing the street were commonly rented out as shops. This created the possibility of contact between *aristocratic families* living in a villa and people *working in shops* connected to the villa, like Paul and his co-workers Priscilla and Aquilla and others. This happened in Corinth. And aristocratic families took for granted the *hierarchical social arrangements* that marked the normalcy of that world.

This is the setting in which Paul addresses the myriad of misunderstandings between these two groups of people (Paul addresses as many as 16 different conflicts/problems between people in this letter--lots of System 1 thinking going on all around!) and this can be seen dramatically in the way *the Lord's Supper* was observed at Corinth (11:17-34).

You see, in Paul's communities (and generally among early Christians), the Lord's Supper was a *real meal*, a "*share meal*," and not simply a ritual involving a morsel of bread and a sip of wine. From what Paul says in chapter 11, the Lord's Supper began with the breaking of the bread, which was followed by the meal. The meal was actually "*framed*" by bread and wine in remembrance of the final meal of Jesus.

But this was not happening at Corinth. Paul's comments presume that the meal was being hosted by those in the community who were wealthy and powerful, most likely in a Villa. Paul writes:

"I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for better but for worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there

¹ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Farrar, Straus and Geroux

are divisions among you ... When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper" (11:17-18, 20).

Paul continues:

"Each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" (11:21-22).

The issue here is that not everybody got to eat the same food. The wealthy had their own food and drink, and others had little or nothing. This practice was common in the Roman world when a wealthy patron hosted a meal that included people from lower social classes. The patron would serve finer food and wine to others from his social rank and lesser food and wine to those of lower rank.

Thus the way the Lord's Supper was practiced at Corinth reflected the social hierarchy and inequality of that world. This is what Paul protests against because the way the Lord's Supper was being practiced at Corinth *denied the equality of life "in Christ."* Instead, it perpetuated the *gulf* between rich and poor and conformed *"life in Christ"* to the norms of this world.

Paul is saying that *everybody* is to be at the *same table* and *eat the same meal*. Within the community, everybody is equal and should get the same—it is a *share* meal, a *sharing* of God's *stuff*, of God's *earth*. Everybody gets enough.² *This* is the supper of the Lord (that's *System 2* thinking!).

When we take a step back from all the ins and outs of the issues in the letter, we can see that Paul is urging something simple on the Corinthians. A great deal of what he says can be summed up in the phrase "appropriate relating." One of the letter's high points is chapters 12–13. Chapter 13 describes at length the principal Christian way of relating, which is with love. Its profundity is evidenced by the fact that it is still read at weddings all over the world today.

Love is patient, love is kind.

It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered.

It keeps no record of wrongs.

² Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul*, Harper One, 2009, pp. 197-200

*Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.
Love never fails. (13:4–8a, NIV)*

Chapter 12 uses the image of the *body* of Christ to lay out the way the community should relate together. No part of the Christian body is unimportant. Every part is linked to every other part, no matter how humble it might seem to be.

Paul applies this advice especially to the myriad of disorders in the Corinthians' communal disfunction.

So many problems in Corinth—and I suspect in many other places—would be solved if Christians were simply *kinder* to one another. They have split up behind *different leaders*—principally behind Paul and Apollos, but also behind Peter, whom Paul calls Cephas, and there is possibly even some independent “Christ party” in view (1:12).

On one level this *factionalism or partisanship* is entirely understandable. Partisanship was a standard feature of ancient Greco-Roman city life, and it hasn't exactly gone away. We today have our own contemporary versions of this: red and blue, rural and urban, gay and straight, male and female, black and white, and on and on. *But it takes System 2 thinking to bridge these artificial divides.*

Here we see both the importance of Christian *leadership* and its *true nature*. Christian leaders (ordained or not) can manage and *heal* these divisions, *provided* they act appropriately. They are to *humble* themselves and *bridge* existing social chasms, *thereby drawing the community together* behind them. But this type of leadership is *deeply countercultural*. It is hard to recognize, while cultural accounts of leadership in terms of *status, wealth, and influence* directly undermine this authentic account.

In sum, the Christian way asks *all* its followers to be *kind* and *considerate* toward one another. It asks its *leaders* to be sensitive to “*the least of these*”—if necessary, living alongside them. These actions are fairly simple in theory but *incredibly demanding in practice*. *They are deeply countercultural*. If they are to take root, above all they require the right sort of leadership. Christian leaders

must help their communities navigate their current locations *ethically* with due depth, sensitivity, and courage, as Paul did for the Corinthians.³

Ascription of Praise

³ Douglas A. Campbell, *Paul Wrote 1 Corinthians in the Middle of a Culture War*, The Christian Century, December 22, 2017