

Epistle: St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians 1:10-17

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The text for this morning's assigned Epistle reading is very interesting and very timely. We don't know the *exact* historical circumstances under which St. Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Corinth—a still existent city in Greece—, but since he is specifically addressing the issue of divisions among them and the importance of unity, we can conclude that there was some kind of crisis along these lines among the Corinthians. From the whole Epistle we know that, although Paul is writing to these Christians as though they are one community, evidently there are some factions or political church parties among them rather than genuine theological differences.

A close examination of this Epistle suggest that there was something of a cult of personality going on—which, by the way, was quite common in the ancient pagan religious world, with huge rivalries between various teachers and even philosophers and their students—a problem which has occasionally also troubled and tormented Christians in later times, including even our own. At that time among non-Christians, sometimes quarrels between different groups following different leaders would erupt into fights and riots, and in Corinth this kind of behavior was being imported into the local Christian community.

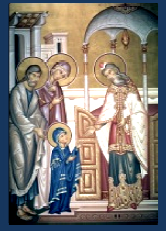
Very often the personality cult that develop, even sometimes in the Church, have more to do with power than with important principles or theology, and this was and is a very worldly way of thinking and acting. The Church must always be counter-cultural and must challenge us to move out of our worldly comfort zones; St. Paul was keenly aware of this, disdaining even to allow a faction of followers or disciples to form around himself.

And so, in this Epistle, in its entirety and not just in this morning's reading, St. Paul clearly set the Greco-Roman pagan culture against the developing Christian culture—two quite different worlds and world-views (as, in fact, they still are, today)—, pointing out that our Christian culture is to be based soundly on the teachings of the Master, Our Lord and God Jesus Christ, and Him crucified and risen, and not the opinions of any one man or group. It is, therefore, *Christ Himself* who is to be our leader and our major focus, not any one man. And it is the Lord Himself, *and Him alone*, who is both the source and sign of unity among us, not any one man. (In the Catholic Church it is

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believed that the Pope is the symbol and the vessel of unity, but this is a much, much later development in Western Christianity, and has no historical background in the early Church whatever.)

Normally I do not refer to or quote from non-Orthodox writers because the Church is herself so rich, so redolent and “fragrant” in Holy Fathers and saints from whom we can quote freely and draw abundant examples. But I’m going to make a brief exception this morning and mention a book—which I heartily recommend, by the way—by C.S. Lewis (more popularly known today for his famous Narnia books for children, but also a very fine writer of many other books). Around sixty years ago he wrote a book called “The Screwtape Letters”—a book which, if you read it, you will find that it haunts you; it just never leaves you. In this work a senior demon, Screwtape is teaching a junior demon, Wormwood, how to subtly draw believers away from Christ. Among his instructions he tells Wormwood to help Christians to start focusing on “purely indifferent things” (as he puts it)—for us Orthodox Christians these could be anything: the style of sermons, the style or kind of icons, perhaps the inessential opinions of the pastor or others in a parish church, the behavior of other congregants, even on whether or not one likes the incense! In this way, this senior demon believed, Christ’s followers can be slowly and deliberately separated from Christ and His true followers. And I have actually seen this happen!

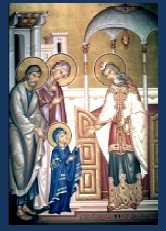
We have all of these temptations in the Orthodox Church even today. Believe me. And we have these temptations in spades. These are always, as Screwtape wrote to Wormwood, “purely indifferent things,” but they always seem mightily and powerfully important to people at the time. These are both practical and sometimes philosophical non-essentials; rarely doctrinal, because *that* would alert people to their true nature. Sometimes these sources of division take the form of enormously strong “opinions” about how to fast, which calendar to follow, which jurisdiction to belong to, and so forth. In my own time in Orthodoxy (42 years and counting, now) I have also seen some personality cults form around various charismatic figures—sometimes bishops, sometimes monastics or priests, sometimes even laymen—, almost all of which eventually end in frightful disaster because they are not focused on “the one thing needful”: our Lord and Savior Himself...

When we go off to college we have in mind some subject or other in which we are going to “major”—as we put it here in America—and accordingly we will arrange our course of studies so as to acquire some sufficiency and,

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hopefully, even expertise in that major subject or area, whatever it may be—say medicine, law, engineering, teaching, and so forth. If we are really *serious*, we will work very hard at this and put in long hours of study and sweat, not letting ourselves become distracted by the frivolities and sometimes the grave immoralities of social and political campus life, elite fraternities, etc. And we will do work this at great expense—expense either to our parents or to ourselves.

Well, we Orthodox Christians also have a “major”: the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Son of God, Jesus Christ Himself. And it is our job to study Him *very hard* and “learn” Him, if you will, and we do this daily by reading Scripture, the writings of the Fathers and the lives of saints, and studying the history of the God-inspired Church to which we belong and developing a real and serious prayer life. But the hard reality is that all of this is not enough. One does not become a doctor *just* by earning a degree. One becomes a doctor by first getting a degree *yes*, and then entering the actual and active practice of medicine and “doing” it. And so must it be with us. It is not enough just to acquire head knowledge about our Faith—although, would that more Orthodox Christians would bestir themselves to do so!—but we must actually lead lives that show we are slowly conforming ourselves and merging with not just the example but with the very Person of Jesus Christ. The more we do this, the more we will be able to resist the temptation to focus on non-essentials that divide and sometimes conquer people in the Church. The more we do this, more we will be able to realize the very promises of Christ to us, His faithful sheep, His lambs, His flock.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us at least *begin!*

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.