

February 12, Ep6A (1 Corinthians 3:1-9)

If God gives growth and growth means change, the implications are broad.

by [Steve Thorngate](#) in the [February 2023](#) issue

I was born a Baptist. I mean, you can't really be *born a Baptist*, but I was born to Baptist parents. I grew up in a charismatic evangelical church, became a Lutheran as a young adult, worked among Methodists for a while, and now worship with the Episcopalians. I can report at least one thing all these American Protestants seem to have in common: we are rather quick to point out divides within our own specific traditions, to distance ourselves from those with whom we share a name but often not much more.

It is easy to lament this disunity—Baptist against Baptist, Lutheran against Lutheran. For that matter, it is easy to lament the story of Protestantism itself, both the split with Rome at its root and its ongoing knack for conflict and schism. While we're at it, let's lament the East-West Schism of 1054. Christians have long struggled to fulfill Jesus' desire that we may all be one (John 17:22).

Lamenting it is a lot easier than actually doing something about it, of course. When Paul tells the Corinthians that neither he nor Apollos is a leader to align oneself with—because only God is—it sounds to my 21st-century ears like an annoying truism. Sure, Paul, you're obviously right: we should all stop saying we belong to one faction or another. We'll get right on that, just as soon as you stop haranguing these very Corinthians for listening to leaders who aren't you. Saying "we're all on the same God team here" is nice, but it's just words, and we've seen in the centuries since Paul wrote his letters just how difficult they are to embody.

And yet it's hard for me to dismiss this passage as just so much empty unity talk. Now, that's partly because Paul arguably self-applies a breastfeeding metaphor—in the service of his larger point that spirit is better than flesh!—but that's another essay. It's hard to dismiss Paul's point about himself, Apollos, and God because of the role he attributes to God: it is "God who gives the growth." Somehow this idea of

looking to God as the giver of growth strikes me as a much richer vision of Christian unity than simply calling people out for forming factions behind this leader or that one and telling them that they should be united instead.

I think it's because growth implies change. When God gives us growth, this means that we are changing. From "infants in Christ," as Paul says, to more mature Christians, sure. But also just in general, in an ongoing way: the life of faith is a life of change, not all of it on some predetermined or predictable path. And the force behind this particular sort of change isn't ourselves or our human leaders or the uncontrollable circumstances of our lives. It's God.

When Christians sit down to talk about unity in Christ, we often focus on lowest common denominators. What, if anything, can we all agree on? How generally can we express it, in order to keep everyone at the table? Can we come up with some essentials that are bare enough to appeal to all of us yet rich enough to seem worth the trouble?

These can be clarifying, relationship-building, deeply useful conversations. But for better or for worse, they tend to focus our attention on whatever it is we see as the foundation of our faith, the bedrock without which we'd become unmoored. They tend to focus our attention, that is, on the things we see as absolute and unchanging.

If God gives growth and growth means change, however, the implications are broad. As Paul says, God's role is the one that really matters. He could have added that factionalism is therefore not just wrongheaded but also shortsighted—you might align yourself with Apollos today, but God's going to change you tomorrow. And what does it mean to pursue unity as followers of a God who gives growth and promotes change?

Is it about lowest common denominators? Or is it something very different, something about our shared commitment to the one who makes us grow, even when we don't know where that growth will take us? Maybe Christian unity has less to do with agreeing on a baseline set of static doctrines or priorities than it does with agreeing that we are called to grow and change—and that God is the one who makes this happen.