

**Kurigasawa Baptist Church, March 1, 2026 Sunday Worship Sermon**

**“The God Who Makes Us Grow” 1 Corinthians 3:1-7**

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This morning, we listen to the words of Scripture from 1 Corinthians, Chapter 3. Corinth in the time of the Apostle Paul was Greece's largest commercial city, a thriving town with a trading port and a key transportation hub. During his second missionary journey, Paul stayed in this city for a year and a half, proclaiming the gospel. After leaving Corinth, he headed for Ephesus, where he remained for three years during his third missionary journey. The unusually long duration of Paul's stay in Ephesus is thought to be partly because he was imprisoned there for a period during those three years. During this time in Ephesus, people sent from the Corinthian church visited Paul. They reported on the situation in Corinth and delivered a letter from the church. This letter contained several questions about problems that had arisen within the church after Paul's departure. Today's First Letter was written to provide Paul's recommendations, instructions, and answers to these questions, addressing the problems that had arisen within the church.

The Corinthian church was far from ideal. There were factions and disputes within it. There were issues of disorderly conduct and behavior unbecoming of Christians, and problems concerning church order. Furthermore, there were people within the church who denied the resurrection, which is the very core of the gospel. However, there was a reason for this. After all, only about twenty years had passed since Christ's church was born in Jerusalem. Moreover, the Corinthian church was one where Greeks, who had grown up entirely without Jewish traditions in a Greek cultural and religious environment, made up the majority of the believers. It might be said that it was inevitable for various problems to arise in such a Gentile church. Yet, viewed another way, the existence of problems within the church is not necessarily something to lament. Problems arise precisely because the church is active. A church stagnant like a swamp may accumulate mud, but it does not flow. An active church, however, possesses a current like a clear stream, striking rocks to spray water, possessing the power to push pebbles and sand downstream. Paul confronted the problems arising within the Corinthian church head-on. At times, he even named individual members in his letters, recording admonitions and concrete strategies for resolving issues. In every age, people seeking salvation gather in churches. Yet the very Scriptures that proclaim salvation do not always contain only pleasant-sounding words. As Jesus said to the rich young man in the Gospel of Mark, “You lack one thing.” All of us who seek salvation have deficiencies and brokenness. The problems arising in the Corinthian church are by no means someone else's problem. Our own faith life and church life are the same as those of the people in Corinth. To overcome this, we are called to listen to God's word and follow Christ.

So what was the primary problem arising within the Corinthian church? It was the emergence of factions within the church. Believers had formed cliques, leading to strife and division. This is described in chapter 1 of this letter. Specifically, factions had formed within the church: “I belong to Paul,” “I follow Apollos,” “I follow Cephas,” “No, I follow Christ.” They divided into groups supporting their favored leader as their banner, and they were arguing with each other. It's easy to understand that there were those in the Corinthian church who followed Paul. Paul was the church's founder and the first pastor who taught the members what faith meant. He likely still enjoyed support and felt close to many believers. Next is Apollos, a figure first introduced in the Acts of the Apostles. Born in Alexandria, he was well-versed in Scripture and an eloquent speaker. Paul, it seems, was not as eloquent as Apollos. Reading Paul's other letters, we find he was described as “weak and uninteresting in speech” when met in person. His letters, however, possessed far greater power in their words. The eloquent Apollos, being younger than Paul, may also have been a factor in his popularity. The third, “Cephas,” refers to Peter. Peter was not someone who settled down to preach at the Corinthian church. However, there were quite a few Jewish believers within the Corinthian church. Among them were likely those who had been baptized and converted in Jerusalem before coming to Corinth. In the Jerusalem church, Peter was considered one of the pillars of the church

alongside James and John. As one of Jesus' first disciples, his influence was immense. We can infer that within the Corinthian church, there was a group of Jewish Christians who revered Peter. Furthermore, beyond these prominent leaders, there was also a group proclaiming, "I follow Christ." At first glance, the phrase "follow Christ" seems entirely unproblematic, implying a focus on God rather than on people. But that was not the case. Under the slogan "follow Christ," they looked down on the leaders, treating Paul, Apollos, and Cephas (Peter) lightly. They looked down on the leaders, and ultimately, they were boasting about themselves. They were making Christ serve them. In response, Paul writes in his letter, "Has Christ been divided?" and "Was Paul crucified for you?" What is truly important in the church of Christ? It is not the personal character or influence of individual leaders. Rather, Paul declares that it is Christ crucified who is of utmost importance.

Now we come to today's passage. In chapter 3, Paul says he has been preaching the gospel to the believers in the Corinthian church as to people of the flesh, not as to people of the Spirit. The believers in the Corinthian church had only been in the faith for four or five years. Paul describes them as spiritual beginners, like infants in their relationship with Christ. Therefore, he says, when he first preached the gospel to them, he gave them milk, not solid food. Yet, even after nearly five years since then, he says they remain people of the flesh. The constant jealousy and strife among them, he suggests, stems from their continuing to walk as people of the flesh. He earnestly desires them to overcome this and become people of the Spirit.

Here we must take heed. It is not that because we believe in Jesus Christ and have been baptized, we cease to be human beings belonging to the flesh. Certainly, as Christians, we have died to the body of sin and received the life of the resurrected Christ, living a new life. Yet, even so, we are still threatened by the desires of the flesh and the temptations of the flesh. Therefore, we must continue to fight against these desires of the flesh. Paul describes this situation in Romans 8: "If the Spirit of God dwells in you, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit" (v. 9). "If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (v. 13). Living in the flesh, we are constantly prone to weakness and brokenness, exposed to the temptations of sin. Satan seeks to trip us up at every turn. There is no room for carelessness or weakness. Yet in such times, we pray: "God, fill us not with the desires of the flesh, but with the Spirit of Christ, and guide us rightly."

Paul must have felt similar temptations. Pastor Apollos, the second pastor, just wasn't good enough. After all, Pastor Paul, the first pastor who led us to faith, was better. Hearing words like, "Pastor Paul was a far more outstanding leader," or "We definitely support Pastor Paul," might have made him feel proud and boastful. Yet, in verse 5, Paul says: "What is Apollos? What is Paul?" "These two served you, each according to the portion the Lord gave him, to lead you to faith." The phrase translated here as "to lead you to faith" strays from the original meaning. The original Greek reads: "by whom you came to believe" as ministers. The true protagonist here is God. Both Paul and Apollos are merely "instruments" pointing to Christ. Incidentally, the original word translated as 'ministered' here is "diakonos." This is the root word for the English "deacon," meaning "servant." In other words, it describes fellow laborers who understand their role is to do their utmost to please their Master and fulfill His expectations, each using the gifts God has given them, working together for God. Paul says we must not reduce this to human works, turning it into division and strife. We do not gather in church to exalt our own names. Rather, we gather to praise the name of God. This is where today's sermon title resonates: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." What matters is not the planter, nor the waterer, but God who gave the growth.

Fellow workers in Christ are not limited to teachers and pastors alone. All who form the church are fellow workers in Christ. Together, we serve the Lord by using our gifts, working to build up the body of Christ. The church belongs to no one. Jesus Christ alone is the head of the church. Remembering this, we desire to become God's field, bearing good fruit, and to build up God's building firmly.

We pray.