

INTRODUCTION AND 1 COR. 1:1 – 3:4

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Introduction to 1 Corinthians

I. General Remarks

A. Like all of Paul's letters, 1 Corinthians is an "occasional" document, meaning it was written to a specific group of Christians in a specific situation or circumstance. If one is to hear correctly what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church today in 1 Corinthians one must first hear correctly what he said in that letter to the church in Corinth. A significant part of that effort is gaining some understanding of the circumstances surrounding the letter.

B. It is easy to idealize churches in the apostolic era, to think they were free of struggle, conflict, and problems and that ministry in those days, especially for the apostles, was a walk in the park because all were of one heart and mind. That was and is the ideal, and there were mountaintop experiences among Christians then as today, but the church of every generation is made up of flawed, sinful human beings, who, though redeemed, continue to struggle with life in the overlap of ages, life on this side of the consummation. Paul had great hardships in his ministry, and it is a testimony to the power of God's Spirit that he endured them.

II. City of Corinth

A. Corinth is located on the narrow isthmus that connects the Peloponnese with the rest of Greece. It controlled both the north-south commercial traffic between the Peloponnese and the mainland and the east-west traffic between Italy and Asia (which, for the most part, found it safer and more convenient to take this "inland" route rather than go around the Peloponnese).

B. The history of the city is in two parts. The wealthy and ancient city of Corinth was utterly destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. It lay dormant for 100 years before being re-founded by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony in 44 B.C. It was Old Corinth that had the many temple prostitutes mentioned by Strabo and that had developed the reputation for sexual vice (so much so that the Greek verb *korinthiazō* – to act like a Corinthian – meant to commit fornication). Sexual sin was undoubtedly abundant in New Corinth, but it was probably no different than in any pagan seaport.

C. The new city quickly became prosperous, with impressive buildings and statues, and attracted many people. Though the Romans officially dominated the scene with their laws, culture, and religion, there was a heavy influence of Greek culture. The city was religiously diverse. It not only had Roman and Greek religions but included a Jewish element and various mystery cults from Egypt and Asia.

D. Corinth's population in Paul's day is estimated to be about 80,000, with another 20,000 in the rural areas outside the city (Guthrie, *2 Corinthians* BECNT, 13). The city attracted large crowds of tourists every two years during the Isthmian Games. This was "a popular religious and athletic festival involving, for instance, musical and literary competitions, contests in public speaking, contests involving horses (e.g., chariot races, skills in chariot driving, men leaping on and off both horses and chariots), various kinds of footraces, the pentathlon, and boxing" (Guthrie, 13).

E. In his commentary on 2 Corinthians, Scott Hafemann gives the following summary, based on a 1996 study by Timothy Savage, of what Greco-Roman culture stressed in terms of social status:

In regard to sizing up one's peers, Savage observes that in Paul's day Greco-Roman society stressed (1) a rugged individualism that valued self-sufficiency; (2) wealth as the key to status within society; (3) a self-display of one's accomplishments and possessions in order to win praise from others; (4) a competition for honor that viewed boasting as its natural corollary; and (5) a pride in one's neighborhood as a reflection of one's social location. These values combined to create a populace for which self-appreciation became the goal and self-gratification the reward.¹

F. Religion was viewed in Greco-Roman culture as a means to health, wealth, and social standing and its value was measured by the power of its deity to deliver those things to its adherents. Hafemann states, drawing again on Savage's work:

The various religions attracted followers by providing visible displays of their gods at work, as seen in the "success" of their members. "The more powerful one's god the more strength one expected to receive and manifest." In the same way, on the popular level orators gained a following not primarily by virtue of their content, but by their ability to captivate their audiences with powerful and entertaining deliveries. In Savage's words, "They honored the one who preached with flair, force and pride."²

G. These cultural trends were magnified in Corinth, which in Ben Witherington's words, became a magnet "for the socially ambitious . . . [for] status-hungry people." Craig Blomberg calls the city the young and prosperous "New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world." To quote Hafemann again:

The "self-made" Roman "freedmen," who had applied the hard labor of their former slave status to the business of making it in this new Roman colony, were known for being crassly materialistic, self-confident, and proud. The atmosphere of sports that filled the air with its pride,

¹ Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 25.

² Hafemann, 26.

competition, and exaltation of heroes, not to mention that Corinth was the entertainment center of Greece, exacerbated all of this.³

H. Greek and Roman cultures valued rhetoric and oratorical skill, which easily deteriorated into a celebrity status and following, something like we see with Hollywood celebrities today. Carson and Moo state "that at Corinth this inherent tendency in the rhetorical tradition mingled with the structure of social climbing and the love of status to turn favorite rhetors into heroes, and audiences into fans."⁴

III. Occasion of the Letter⁵

A. Paul first preached the gospel in Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18). He went there from Athens and was later joined there by Silas and Timothy (Acts 18:5; 2 Cor. 1:9).

B. Paul's condition when he arrived in Corinth is reflected in 1 Cor. 2:3 where he says, "I came to you in weakness and fear and with much trembling." He stayed with Priscilla and Aquila, a Jewish couple that had recently moved to Corinth after being expelled from Rome under the edict of Emperor Claudius, and supported himself as a tentmaker or leatherworker.

C. The Jews in Corinth dragged Paul before the proconsul Gallio and charged Paul with persuading people to worship God contrary to the law, but Gallio refused to entertain what he saw as a religious dispute. The Jews (possibly other citizens or a combination) then beat Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue.

D. Paul remained in Corinth a good while after that, his total stay exceeding 1½ years (Acts 18:18:11, 18), during which time he wrote 1 & 2 Thessalonians. He then sailed from Cenchreae to Caesarea, stopping off briefly at Ephesus where he left Priscilla and Aquila who had accompanied him. He then went up and greeted the church in Jerusalem and returned to Antioch. This is now probably A.D. 51/52. He spent a short time with his home congregation in Antioch before heading out again on his third missionary journey (Acts 18:18-22), probably in A.D. 52.

E. Paul probably arrived back in Ephesus in the summer or fall of that year. He had a very fruitful ministry and was there over 2 ½ years, until the summer or fall of 55 (Acts 19:8, 10, 20:31). Sometime after Paul left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus (probably in the fall of 51) and before he arrived back in that city (probably in the summer or fall of 52), Apollos came to Ephesus, knowing only the baptism of John. Priscilla and Aquila explained to him the way of God more accurately, and Apollos then went to Corinth with a letter of recommendation from the brothers in Ephesus (Acts 18:24-19:1). During Paul's absence from Corinth, Apollos and others, probably including Peter, built on the foundation he had laid there.

³ Hafemann, 27.

⁴ Carson and Moo, 427.

⁵ Drawn in significant part from Carson and Moo, 366-370, 420-425.

F. While at Ephesus, Paul learned of certain problems in the Corinthian church and wrote them a letter in which he forbid them to associate with immoral people. This letter has not been preserved, but we know about it from the reference to it in 1 Cor. 5:9. Paul must have been speaking in the context of church discipline, but some of the Corinthians apparently interpreted his words in a very general sense (1 Cor. 5:9-10).

G. Afterward Paul received reports from "some from Chloe's household" (1:11) about the ugly factionalism in Corinth. The three church delegates – Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:17) – brought a letter from the church and their own verbal reports of the state of affairs which revealed the church was marred by abuses of the Lord's table, immorality, lawsuits, uncertainties about the place of marriage, uncertainties about the propriety of eating food sacrificed to idols, a warped view of charismatic gifts, and a spiritualized view of the resurrection. In addition, segments of the church were disenchanted with Paul and resistant to his leadership. All this information established Paul's agenda as he wrote 1 Corinthians, probably in A.D. 54.

H. It is doubtful that Paul sent 1 Corinthians via Timothy. Given that Timothy is not mentioned in 1:1, 4:17 should probably be translated as an event that had already taken place (not as an epistolary aorist). Whether Timothy had yet arrived in Corinth after that sending is debatable. The suppositional nature of 1 Cor. 16:10 makes it unlikely that Timothy is the bearer of the letter.

IV. The Church

A. It was predominantly Gentile but quite diverse. It included Jews, Greeks, Romans, slaves, and freedmen.

B. In the words of Gordon Fee:

Thus, the picture that emerges is one of a predominantly Gentile community, the majority of whom were at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder, although there were two or three wealthy families. As former pagans, they brought to the Christian faith a Hellenistic worldview and attitude toward ethical behavior. Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, an inordinate amount of Corinth was yet in them, emerging in a number of attitudes and behaviors that required radical surgery without killing the patient. This is what 1 Corinthians attempts to do.⁶

1 Cor. 1:1 -3:4

I. Introduction - 1:1-9

A. Salutation (1:1-3) – **Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Sosthenes, the brother,**²**to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those**

⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 4.

having been sanctified in Christ Jesus, those called to be saints, with all who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place, their [Lord] and ours: ³Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. The identification of Sosthenes is not certain, but he is possibly the Sosthenes mentioned in Acts 18:17, the ruler of the synagogue who was beaten in front of Gallio. If so, he has become a believer (like his colleague or predecessor Crispus) and is now with Paul in Ephesus.

2. Notice how, despite all the problems this church had, Paul addresses the letter to "the church of God that is in Corinth, to those having been sanctified in Christ Jesus, those called to be saints." They were in need of repentance and reform, but they had not gone beyond the pale so as to no longer be part of the family.

3. Those called to be saints include not only the Corinthian believers but "all who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place." As Everett Ferguson has noted, "The phrase 'in every place' (in Christian usage based on Mal. 1:11) seems to have had a special reference 'to every place of meeting,' and not the general adverbial sense of 'everywhere' (cf. 1 Thess. 1:8; 1 Tim. 2:8; less obviously 2 Cor. 2:14)."⁷ Jesus is acclaimed as Lord in Christian gatherings for worship (though certainly not exclusively there).

B. Thanksgiving (1:4-9) – ⁴I always give thanks to my God concerning you for the grace of God that was given to you in Christ Jesus, ⁵because in every way you were enriched in him, in every kind of speech and knowledge, ⁶as the testimony of Christ was confirmed among you, ⁷so that you are not lacking in any gift while eagerly awaiting the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸who also will confirm you to the end, [leaving you] blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus [Christ]. ⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

1. Despite the problems in the church, their wavering about Paul and their factions and various sins, Paul regularly thanks God for the grace he had given them in Christ. Paul can look past the failures and thank God for his work in their lives.

2. More specifically, Paul gives thanks to God for his grace in liberally pouring out gifts on the Corinthians. They were not lacking any gift while eagerly awaiting the Lord's return.

a. Paul highlights the fact they were enriched in every kind of speech and knowledge, almost certainly referring to gifts of spiritual utterance (e.g., prophesying, tongues, word of knowledge, word of wisdom) and to gifts of special knowledge (probably related to prophetic revelation).

b. These gifts had a high profile in the community, but they had become a problem that Paul is going to tackle in the letter. He makes clear that he is thankful

⁷ Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 234.

for God's grace in giving the gifts – that's not the problem. The problem is what they've done with them.

3. The reference to awaiting the Lord's return may be a reminder to them that they still await the final glory. We will see that some in Corinth apparently thought that all or most of the blessings of the age to come were already being experienced in their fullness. In other words, they wrongly minimized the difference between what we are now and what we will be on that day.

4. God bestowed his grace and gifts as the testimony of Christ was *confirmed* among them, meaning his grace and gifts were given as the Corinthians confirmed the truth of the gospel by their acceptance of it. Those blessings accompanied the Corinthians' embrace of the gospel.

5. Paul says in vv. 8-9 that in addition to having bestowed his grace and gifts, God also will *confirm* them, the Corinthians, to the end. As "confirm" in v. 6 means to confirm the truth by its acceptance, I think "confirm" in v. 8 means to confirm the truth of their faith by accepting them as his. God will confirm as his all who confirm the gospel, all who accept as true the testimony of Christ. He will never prove unfaithful to his people. And, of course, those he confirms by accepting as his will be blameless on the Day of Judgment at the Lord's return.

II. Division Over Leaders (1:10 – 4:21)

A. Appeal to end leader-centered factions (1:10-17) – ¹⁰**Now I urge you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, that is, that there not be divisions among you but that you be restored to the same mind and the same opinion.** ¹¹**For it was made clear to me about you, my brothers, by those of Chloe, that there are conflicts among you.** ¹²**What I mean is that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ."** ¹³**Has Christ been parceled out? Was Paul crucified for you, or were you baptized into the name of Paul? ¹⁴I give thanks [to God] that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one may say that you were baptized into my name. ¹⁶(I also baptized the household of Stephanus; beyond that, I do not know if I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, not in wisdom of word, lest the cross of Christ be made empty.**

1. Paul appeals to them to end the divisions that have cropped up among them, divisions he learned about from members of Chloe's household. The nature of the division is suggested in v. 12.

a. Christian leaders, probably involuntarily, had become the focal points of dissension. The congregation was lining up behind different teachers and in danger of developing full-blown factions.

b. Those saying "I am of Christ" undoubtedly were doing so in a sectarian spirit. Perhaps in reaction to those boasting in mere men, these people had fallen into the same trap of spiritual elitism. They saw themselves as spiritually superior to their Christian brothers and sisters.

2. Paul exposes the absurdity of this thinking by a series of rhetorical questions, the answer to each of which is a resounding "NO!"

a. Has Christ been distributed in separate pieces? Absurd! There is only one, undivided Christ, and if you are part of him you are part of that oneness. It is trivial whether you attach yourself to Paul or Apollos or Peter. Conversely, if you do not have him, no devotion to human teachers will help.

b. Was Paul crucified for you, or were you baptized into the name of Paul? If not, then why in the world do you want to lay claim to Paul (or any other human teacher)? The one who counts is the one who was crucified for you and into whose name you were baptized.

(1) Paul thanks God for the historical fortuity that he physically baptized only a few people in Corinth. Note in Acts 18:8 that *many* were baptized during Paul's ministry in Corinth; that is part of converting to Christ. It's just that Paul did not baptize them.

(2) The reason he is thankful is that it prevents people from developing some special allegiance to him because he happened to baptize them, from thinking that they were somehow "baptized into his name." Paul shudders at the thought. They are Christ's disciples, not his.

(3) Paul then explains the fact that he baptized so few on the basis that Christ did not send him to baptize but to preach the gospel. Baptism certainly is important, but it could be done by plenty of other people. Paul's charge and focus was on preaching that brings people to the point of baptism.

(a) With regard to his preaching of the gospel, he says that it was "not in wisdom of word," meaning not with "cleverness in speaking" (BDAG, 934) or "manipulative rhetoric" (Thiselton, 143). Garland (p. 56) says, "Although 'in wisdom of word' can apply to 'cultured speech with cleverness,' . . . it connotes more than 'technical skill at language.' It is connected to 'winning arguments and impressing an audience by rhetorical display rather than content.'" A significant part of this display was one's bearing and presence and one's voice. Quintilian wrote in the late first century (Garland, 86):

[W]ithout constancy, confidence and courage, art, study and proficiency will be of no avail. You might as well put weapons in the hands of the unwarlike and the coward. . . . Trachalus appeared to stand out above all his contemporaries, when he was speaking. Such was the effect produced by his

lofty stature, the fire of the eye, the dignity of his brow, the excellence of his gesture, coupled with a voice which . . . surpassed the voice of all tragedians that I have ever heard.

(b) Paul's preaching was not a rhetorical display that impressed and drew people apart from the content of the message. It was not a performance that sought to win people to the presentation, to the packaging. (In 2 Cor. 10:10 Paul notes that some Corinthians said about him, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but his physical presence is weak²² and his speech is of no account.") It was the delivery of *a message*, a message that brought people face to face with the crucified Christ.

(c) For Paul to play the "oration game" would be to invite evaluation on the basis of worldly criteria, on the style of his presentation. In doing so, the cross would be emptied of its power because people then would be responding to Paul rather than to Christ crucified. In a world that judges the message of a crucified God to be foolishness, the price of making that message acceptable (wise) by changing the subject from the message's content to the power of one's oration (by presenting it in "wisdom of word") is to empty the message of its efficacy. The cross, in all its "foolishness," must be front and center; it cannot slip in unnoticed on an orator's coattails.

B. God, not human wisdom, is the source of salvation life (so only he is worthy of allegiance) (1:18-31)

1. Worldly wisdom impotent in knowing God (1:18-25) – **¹⁸For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the intelligence of the intelligent I will set aside." ²⁰Where is the wise man? Where is the expert in the law? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God was pleased, through the foolishness of what was preached, to save those who believe; ²²since Jews ask for signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolish thing of God is wiser than men and the weak thing of God is stronger than men.**

a. Paul probably raised the issue of his not preaching in a way that made himself the focal point (in wisdom of word) because the Corinthians were polarizing around individual teachers. By identifying with particular teachers rather than with their common message of Christ crucified, the Corinthians were beginning to evaluate the gospel according to worldly wisdom, according to worldly assessments of the relative merits of the various leaders. In their party loyalty rooted in these worldly assessments, they were boasting over against one another. It may be that assessments of speaking prowess, which prowess was connected to social status, were part of this.

b. In 1:17 Paul said that to present the gospel as a rhetorical performance would be to empty the cross of its power. In 1:18 he explains why -- because the message of a crucified savior is foolishness in the eyes of the world (to those on the way to destruction).

(1) The idea that the divine savior of mankind had died the death of the lowest of criminals seemed absurd; it clashed with their assumptions about God and his way of working. As Martin Hengel says in his book *Crucifixion*:

The heart of the Christian message, which Paul described as the "word of the cross," ran counter not only to Roman political thinking, but to the whole ethos of religion in ancient times and in particular to the ideas of God held by educated people (p.5). . . .

. . . [T]o believe that the one pre-existent Son of the one true God, the mediator at creation and the redeemer of the world, had appeared in very recent times in out-of-the-way Galilee as a member of the obscure people of the Jews, and even worse, had died the death of a common criminal on a cross, could only be regarded as a sign of madness (p.6-7). . . .

. . . A crucified messiah, son of God or God, must have seemed a contradiction in terms to anyone, Jew, Greek, Roman, or barbarian asked to believe such a claim, and it will certainly have been thought offensive and foolish (p.10).

(2) Given that the cross *is* foolishness to *the world*, one can only present it to the world as something wise by not presenting it as it is, by camouflaging it with something that the world esteems. But if you camouflage it, if you distract the world from what it finds foolish (the content) to what it finds wise (the performance), you will deprive the world of the only thing that can save it. The cross cannot be adapted to the world's outlook; it must confront it. The medicine must be given straight if it's to do any good.

c. For those willing to receive the message in spite of its seeming foolishness, for those being saved, it is the power of God. The power of God for salvation is effected through the message of a crucified Savior. As Paul says in Rom. 1:16: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."

d. Paul goes on to say in 1:19 that this foolishness of God's salvation plan is in fact his way of doing what he said he would do: set aside and destroy human wisdom. The cross is the ultimate fulfillment of that promise.

e. Where are those who epitomize worldly wisdom -- the wise men, experts in the law, and philosophers -- when it comes to this work of God? They are

nowhere. In fact, human wisdom has been made foolish in that it failed to bring the world to a knowledge of God.

(1) God, in his wisdom, arranged things such that humans cannot come to know him through and on the basis of their own wisdom, through their own power and devices. We cannot know God in our way, on our terms; we cannot "figure God out." True knowledge of who God is and what he is doing in the world can come only by accepting what he reveals.

(2) God despises the boasting, pride, and self-righteousness that stem from humanity's sense of self-determination and self-achievement (e.g., Ps. 5:5, 10:4, 12:3, 59:12, 75:4; Prov. 8:13, 15:25, 16:18, 21:4; Isa. 16:6; Jer. 9:23). All of these would have been fueled had mankind through its wisdom come to know God. God wants those who will trust in him rather than in their own powers (worldly wisdom).

(3) Having willed that the world not know him through wisdom, God chose to save those who would believe the foolish gospel, the gospel that seems so contrary to worldly wisdom.

f. Jews have it figured that God must mark his work with a certain demonstration of heavenly power (the indisputable heavenly sign - see, e.g., Mat. 12:38-39) and Greeks insist on what is philosophically acceptable, but Paul and his companions preach Christ crucified. Instead of power and wisdom, they preach weakness and folly.

(1) This message was a scandal for everybody, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

(2) But to those who are called, those Jews and Greeks who believe this foolish message, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. He is the power of God in conquering evil and redeeming mankind and the wisdom of God in solving what had defeated secular wisdom.

(3) For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

2. The gospel's contradiction of worldly wisdom confirmed by fact the church consists mainly of "nobodies" (1:26-31) – ²⁶**For consider your calling, brothers, that not many were wise according to the flesh, not many were powerful, not many were high born.** ²⁷**But God chose the foolish things of the world so that he might shame the wise, and God chose the weak things of the world so that he might shame the strong things,** ²⁸**and God chose the lowly things of the world and the things that are despised, the things that are not, so that he might nullify the things that are,** ²⁹**in order that no flesh may boast before God.** ³⁰**But from him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, that is, [our] righteousness and holiness and redemption,** ³¹**so that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."**

a. To further his argument that the gospel he preached stands in direct contradiction to human wisdom, human expectations about God, Paul turns to the existence of the Corinthians themselves as believers. The very fact that His church is made up mostly of "nobodies," people from the lower classes, shows the foolishness of God that confounds the wise.

(1) Celsus, a Roman opponent of Christianity in the late 2d century, ridiculed Christianity in these words:

Their injunctions are like this. "Let no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible draw near. For these abilities are thought by us to be evils. But as for anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone who is a child, let him come boldly." By the fact that they themselves admit that these people are worthy of their God, they show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and little children.

(2) When God called out a people to be his, he called them without regard for their social status, without regard for their standing in the eyes of the world. And many who had status were offended that it was ignored. As Garland comments (p. 74), "When Paul proclaimed the word of the cross, it did not attract the wise and powerful. They are not excluded but tend to exclude themselves by rejecting the wisdom of the cross, which does not honor their achievements but pours contempt on their pride."

(3) The church is filled with "riff-raff" in the world's eyes to make clear that salvation has nothing to do with human status or standing. It is not an entitlement of the privileged or a matter of human accomplishment but a completely undeserved gift. So no person may boast that he stands clean before God because of his intellect, education, or pedigree.

b. For those who received the gospel, Christ became wisdom from God, meaning he became their holiness, righteousness, and redemption. So then, as it is written, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

C. Example of Paul's preaching (2:1 – 3:4)

1. He kept the focus on the message of Christ crucified (2:1-5) – **And I, when coming to you, brothers, came not with excellence of word or of wisdom while proclaiming to you the mystery of God. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³And I was with you, in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, ⁴and my word and my preaching were not with the persuasion of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵that your faith not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.**

a. Paul points to himself, the founder of the church in Corinth, as a counter example to their infatuation with human wisdom, with worldly standards of

evaluation. When he preached the gospel there he did not do so with the kind of rhetorical display that the elite applaud. The reason was that he had already resolved to have the gospel, with its crucified Messiah, as his singular focus and passion while he was among them. He didn't preach so as to point to himself but to point to God and Christ.

b. In his time in Corinth, Paul manifested qualities the world deems weak and foolish. Rather than invincibility and bravado, Paul exhibited weakness, fear, and much trembling. Paul was not immune to sufferings or hardships, and he had grave trepidation over the prospect of evangelizing in such a city as Corinth (see, Acts 18:9-11).

c. And though lacking the "persuasion of wisdom," the rhetorical power that is esteemed by the world, Paul's preaching had a persuasive power of its own -- the faith-producing power of God's Spirit.

(1) Despite Paul's failure to measure up to the worldly standards by which they were now judging, they could not deny that God had used his "substandard preaching" to produce the desired results. It is another case of the weakness of God being stronger than human strength, of his working contrary to human expectations.

(2) Garland writes (p. 87):

What is clear is that Paul attributes the Corinthians' conversion to the powerful intervention of the Spirit. He understands God's power, then, to supplant the preacher's weakness. The proof of this power is not the audience's round of applause for the preacher's rhetorical art but their changed lives and the formation of a new community. Paul is not talking about "deeds of power" (12:28) or "signs and wonders" attending his preaching (Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12), but their conversion (1 Thess. 1:5-6; Fee 1994: 920). Were he referring to miracles, he would have used the plural (Parry 1926: 50).

(3) Ciampa and Rosner likewise state (p. 118):

In what, then, did *the Spirit's power* consist? Does the collocation of "Spirit" and "power" imply Spirit-empowered miracles? Is Paul talking here about "deeds of power" (1 Cor. 12:28), translated "miracles" in the TNIV? In other words, did "signs and wonders" (Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12) accompany Paul's preaching in Corinth? Fee rightly notes that the "demonstration of the Spirit and power" here cannot be taken as a reference to miracles since in the context of 1 Corinthians this is the very triumphalist assertion Paul is arguing against. In contrast to Jewish requests for signs and Greek desire for wisdom, Paul preaches Christ crucified (cf. 1:22-23). It would thus be a little odd, as Fee notes, if Paul were to appeal to powerful signs and wonders that persuaded hearers! In the context of his own personal weakness, the demonstration of the Spirit's power is seen in the Corinthians' conversion, as the Spirit applies the word of the gospel, Christ and him

crucified, to their hearts: "the evidence lies with the Corinthians themselves and their own experience of the Spirit as they responded to the message of the gospel." The plural of *power* would have been a more unambiguous reference to miracles. *Power* here is about moral conviction, not miraculous display.

1 Thessalonians 1:5 confirms this understanding. In Thessalonica, Paul reports, "our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit." The following context makes clear that the evidence of this power was the "deep conviction" and changed lives of the Thessalonians: "you welcomed the message" (1:6). Paul tells the Corinthians the same thing. Paul insists that it is not sophisticated speech, nor even signs and wonders, but your Spirit-wrought conversion which represents the best proof of the truth of my message (cf. 1 Thess. 2:13).

(4) This ought to encourage us in our evangelism. However "weakly" we present the gospel, God can produce faith in the human heart.

d. The faith that was produced, produced by the Spirit through Paul's simple but straight presentation of the gospel, was not a faith in the wisdom of men but a faith in the foolish gospel, i.e., in the power of God (see, 1:17-18, 24).

2. The gospel does not comport with worldly wisdom, but it is true wisdom for those mature enough to grasp its implications for living (2:6-16) – **⁶Yet we do speak wisdom among the mature, but a wisdom not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are being brought to an end. ⁷Rather, we speak God's secret wisdom that has been hidden, which God predestined for our glory before the ages, ⁸which none of the rulers of this age knew, for if they had known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹But, as it is written, "What things the eye has not seen and the ear has not heard and [what] has not arisen in the human heart, [these] things God prepared for those who love him." ¹⁰For* to us God revealed [them] by the Spirit, for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. ¹¹For who among men knows the things of a man except the man's spirit within him? So also no one has ever known the things of God except the Spirit of God. ¹²Now we did not receive the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God so that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God, ¹³which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom but in [words] taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things in spiritual [words]. ¹⁴Now a natural man does not accept the things of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to him, and he is unable to know [them], because they are spiritually judged. ¹⁵But the spiritual man judges all things, but he himself is judged by no one. ¹⁶"For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.**

a. Paul makes clear that he and those who faithfully proclaim the gospel do in fact speak "a wisdom among the mature." "Mature" was probably a term used by the Corinthians to support power bids against one another. They would lay claim to spiritual maturity, for themselves or some leader, on the basis of worldly standards like

education, wealth, social status (of which rhetorical prowess was an indicator), or even manifestation of more spectacular spiritual gifts.

b. Paul says those who preach the cross speak "a wisdom among the mature."

(1) I think Thiselton is probably correct in thinking that Paul means "wisdom" in the tradition of Proverbs and other Wisdom literature. The cross is *wisdom* in that sense in that it encapsulates what right or skillful living is all about; it is concentrated insight for living a proper life. This is implicit in Phil 2:5-8:

⁵Think this [way] among you, which also [was] in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, being in the form of God, did not consider being equal with God as something to be used for his own advantage, ⁷but emptied himself by taking [the] form of a slave, by being born in [the] likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, ⁸he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross!

(2) That wisdom implicit in the cross is spoken "among the mature" in the sense it is only apprehended by those whose minds have been sufficiently transformed to see the cross's implications for life. Paul here assumes this to be the normal state for Christians, for those who love God.

(3) In spiritual adults, the cross produces humility, patience, selflessness, forbearance, a willingness to forgive, a willingness to forego power and status, and a love for *all* people, regardless of their station. The result is unity and harmony. This stands in stark contrast to worldly wisdom, which focuses on status, power, and distinction. The fruit of those things is polarization, stratification, and division, the very thing happening in Corinth.

(4) Garland puts it this way (p. 93):

Paul's use of the terms "mature" and "infants" shows that gradations do exist among Christians (Oster 1995: 81). But the distinction is between juvenile Christians who fail to incarnate the cross by nursing jealousies and stoking rivalries, and the "mature" who accept God's foolishness as wisdom and the world's wisdom as foolishness. Being spiritually adult means recognizing and embracing God's wisdom in the cross and knowing that it invalidates the wisdom of the age. Paul rejects any esoteric wisdom that would sever some believers from other believers who lack this wisdom. The wisdom of this age creates a stratified society of elites and inferiors. By contrast, the wisdom of the cross emphasizes human solidarity. Under the cross, all must stand together.

c. God's wisdom in the cross, which was set before time began for the *glory* of Christians, for their resurrection and end-time salvation, has been hidden by

God. In other words, it is not accessible without God's revelation; it cannot be unraveled by mere mortals. To quote Garland again (p. 96):

When the wisdom of this age meets God's wisdom hidden before the ages in the cross, it finds nothing convincing according to its standards. Instead, it meets disarming weakness, suffering, and the paradox of one identified as the "Lord of glory" enduring the most dishonorable death. It dismisses the cross as consummate folly. Paul's point is that humans cannot unravel the mystery for themselves; it can only be given to them by God. This wisdom can be discerned as wisdom only by those who trust and love God (2:9), not by those who only analyze and debate.

d. The perversity of the world's wisdom is exemplified in its rulers, who, along with the present world order, are in the process of being abolished, being replaced by the kingdom of God. Because they lacked true wisdom, the wisdom of the cross, the rulers were led by the false wisdom of their fallen minds to the ultimate in wrong action, to crucifying the Lord of glory.

(1) N. T. Wright observes, "The 'rulers and authorities' of Rome and of Israel -- as Caird points out, the best government and highest religion the world at that time had ever known -- conspired to put Jesus on the cross." (Garland, 96-97)

(2) Reading between the lines, Paul is telling the Corinthians that in judging as the world judges, rather than in accordance with the message of Christ crucified, they were aligning themselves with those who murdered him.

e. The fact the rulers of this present world order were blind to God's wisdom in the cross is not surprising in that Scripture indicates that God's ways, represented here by the unimaginable future blessings of heaven and eternity (the things God prepared for those who love him), are beyond the ways of knowing esteemed by the world.

(1) The eye, ear, and heart are organs of cognition in Semitic imagery. According to Walter Kaiser, they mean that these things did not come from empirical sources (eye has not seen), traditional knowledge passed on in communication (ear has not heard), or intuitive insight (heart has not conceived).

(2) The source of this citation is unclear; it is probably an amalgamation of O.T. texts that circulated in Judaism.

f. Whereas the things God prepared for those who love him, i.e., the future blessings of heaven and eternity (Paul is continuing with this example), were beyond mankind's exalted epistemology, God revealed them to Paul and the other apostles (and ultimately to all Christians) by his Spirit.

(1) The Spirit is ideally suited to reveal the things of God because he searches out even the depths of God. He is one who truly knows God. No mere man has ever known the things of God.

(2) The Holy Spirit is here analogized to the human spirit or consciousness. Just as a man's spirit or consciousness is the only thing that knows his secret things, so the Holy Spirit is the one who knows (and reveals) the mind of God.

g. The apostles received the Spirit -- the Spirit of God, not of the world -- in order to know what things God has freely given mankind in Christ.

(1) That, of course, is not all one could say about the work of the Spirit, but it's the work pertinent to Paul's point. The Spirit revealed to them the meaning of the salvation accomplished in the cross.

(2) And this revelation is what they speak, not in words taught by mere human wisdom, but in words taught by divine revelation.

h. Paul says that a natural man, one operating from a "Spiritless" perspective, regards as foolishness the things revealed by the Spirit of God (such as the wisdom of the cross, its meaning for life). He does not accept them (despite understanding them) because only one who views them from a mind transformed by the Spirit can embrace them. He's suggesting to them that in not accepting the things of the Spirit, God's perspective, as evidenced by their division, they are acting like mere natural men rather than the spiritually reborn people they are.

i. The spiritual adult (the presumptively normal Christian), on the other hand, makes wise spiritual judgments and is not himself subject to the judgment of any natural man. Paul bolsters this point with a Scripture indicating that no mere human knows the mind of the Lord, whereas those of the Spirit, such as Paul, have the mind of Christ (the perspective given by the Spirit).

3. Corinthians were (and still are) too worldly (as shown by their division) to appreciate Paul's message as meaty (3:1-4) - **And I, brothers, was not able to speak to you as to spiritual men but as to fleshly ones, as to infants in Christ. ²I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet able. But neither are you able even now, ³for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and rivalry among you, are you not fleshly, that is, walking as a [mere] man? ⁴For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not [mere] men?**

a. Though, as Christians, the Corinthians should have been spiritual adults who were able to comprehend the cross's meaning for life, they were "fleshly," meaning they were operating from a worldly perspective. They are in Christ, but they are spiritual babies who are unable to appreciate properly the wisdom of the cross, its implications for living.

b. When Paul says he gave them "milk, not solid food," I think he is responding to how some in Corinth were characterizing his preaching. In terms of rhetoric and oratory, they judged it as elementary, as something basic and bland. In other words, they assessed his preaching as milk not solid food because they were not spiritually mature enough to see beyond its package to the depth of its content.

c. I don't think Paul is saying that the message he presented to them was indeed elementary and that he held back the deeper teaching because they were not able to comprehend it. He would hardly label the message of Christ crucified as something elementary or lightweight when he just described that message as the power and wisdom of God (1:18, 24, 30), as wisdom among the mature (2:6), and as God's secret wisdom (2:7).

d. I think he is saying that his proclamation of the mystery of God, his preaching of Christ crucified, was *misperceived* by them as elementary because they were too immature to view it correctly. They saw what he gave them as elementary because they evaluated it from an infantile, worldly perspective that misjudged its profundity. They were not able to see it for what it is – true wisdom. Paraphrased, Paul means in v. 2, "*from your perspective, I gave you milk not solid food.*"

e. Indeed, they still are not able to recognize the word of the cross as the profound teaching that it is because they still are fleshly. The proof that they're still fleshly is their jealousy and rivalry that is fueling their division. When Christians begin forming factions, they have missed the wisdom of the cross.

f. I know this meaning isn't obvious, but in context I think it is the right one. Lest you think I'm alone on this, here's another quote from David Garland (pp. 108-109):

The contrast between [milk and meat] is probably attributable to some Corinthian distinction, which [Paul] echoes. Hooker (1966: 21) comments, "Yet while he uses their language, the fundamental contrast in Paul's mind is not between two quite different diets which he has to offer, but between the true food of the Gospel with which he has fed them (whether milk or meat) and the synthetic substitutes which the Corinthians preferred." They hankered after the more exquisite charms of clever oratory to tickle their ears, which made the simplicity of the word of the cross seem bland and elementary. If Paul's message looks like milk to them, it discloses that they are not as mature or spiritual as they think. In fact, their discord, caused by selfish ambitions that trample the wisdom of the cross, has proved their immaturity. The divisions are incompatible with following Christ because they emulate the world's wisdom. It betokens their party spirit, not the Holy Spirit. Therefore, "they do not need a change of diet but a change of perspective" (Fee, 1987: 292). Just as only "the mature" recognize the foolishness of the gospel to be the highest wisdom, so only the mature recognize this "milk" to be solid food.

f. Similarly, Gordon Fee writes:

[B]y considering Paul's teaching "milk for babes" they show that they are "mere infants"; they have abandoned the gospel for something that may look like "solid food" but is without nutritional value. Paul allows that they are indeed "in Christ" because they are believers after all; his concern, however, is not that they "progress" into deeper teaching from the rudimentary, but that they abandon their present "childish" behavior altogether so that they may appreciate the "milk" for what it is, "solid food."

Fee in a footnote quotes Morna Hooker's assessment: "The Corinthians' failure to understand the wisdom spoken in a mystery is not due to the fact that Paul is withholding it from them, but is the result of their own inability to digest what he is offering them."