

LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH: 1 CORINTHIANS

Week 4: The Wisdom of the Gospel

ANALYSIS

- I. INTRODUCTION, 1:1–9
- II. A CHURCH DIVIDED: INTERNALLY AND AGAINST PAUL, 1:10–4:21
 - A. The Problem: Division over Leaders in the Name of Wisdom, 1:10–17
 - B. Reasons for the Problem, 1:18–4:21
 - 1. Misunderstanding of the gospel message, 1:18–3:4
 - a. The foolishness of the gospel, 1:18–2:5
 - b. The wisdom of the gospel: revealed by the Spirit, 2:6–16

Up until this point in his letter, Paul has had a very negative view of “wisdom.” That is because he is arguing against a Corinthian attitude toward it that has placed him and his gospel in a less than favorable light. He now makes a turn in the argument in order to reassert that the gospel he preaches is really wisdom—the wisdom of God. But it cannot be perceived as such by those who are pursuing “wisdom”; it is recognized only by those who have the Spirit. Because the Corinthians do have the Spirit, and thus the mind of Christ, they should have seen the cross for what it is—God’s wisdom. By pursuing wisdom, they are acting just like those without the Spirit, the unsaved, who are also pursuing wisdom but see the cross as foolishness.

(2:6) We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.

Despite the insistence that his preaching was not with the “wise and persuasive words” so that the Corinthians’ faith might not rest on “human wisdom,” Paul says we nevertheless do “speak a message of wisdom.” The shift to the plural here and in vv. 7 and 13 is probably another literary plural, as in 1:23. At the most it might also include other apostolic men.

When Paul says that he does speak wisdom, by “wisdom” he does *not* refer to what is fascinating the Corinthians; wisdom that belongs strictly to this age and its rulers, who are already “coming to nothing.” Instead, as Paul has already declared: “We preach Christ crucified...the wisdom of God” (1:23–24).

It is only the “mature” who are able to recognize the gospel as wisdom. We might be inclined to think that the “mature” refers to spiritually mature Christians. So, Paul would be saying that only mature, spiritual Christians can see the wisdom in the gospel. Such a view would run counter to Paul’s whole argument and destroy everything he has said in 1:18–2:5 by admitting that the gospel has secret truths available only to a few. But Paul does not have a different gospel for different classes of Christians. Those who regarded Paul’s message as foolishness were not immature Christians but the unsaved. The contrasts in the passage are between the “called” and the unsaved, not between classes of Christians. Paul will go on to argue that the reason some do not see the wisdom in the gospel is because they lack the Holy Spirit and thus are unsaved, not because they are immature Christians. But if “the mature” refers to all Christians why does Paul use such potentially confusing terminology. Because, most likely the terminology is the Corinthians’ terminology, confusing for us but not for them. In their rejection of Paul, they think he is treating them like mere babes, feeding them only with milk, while they perceive themselves to have advanced to maturity (cf. 4:8). Those “in Christ” (1:30) are

“the mature,” and thus the Corinthians are included. The Greek word for “mature”—*teleios*—indicates someone who is complete. All Christians are complete in the sense that they have been given at the time of their salvation all they need to live the Christian life. But the Corinthians’ behavior indicates that they are acting like infants. Paul’s concern is to persuade them to adopt the thinking that goes along with being “mature” in Christ.

The wisdom of which Paul is now speaking is of a radically different kind from that which the Corinthians are currently pursuing, which is “of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.”

(2:7) No, we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. (2:8) None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

V. 7 explains the nature of God’s wisdom that made it impossible for the wise of this age to grasp it. First, it is a “mystery.”

Second, God’s wisdom—salvation through a crucified Messiah—“has been hidden.”

Third, God’s wisdom, long hidden—and still hidden to some—was “destined” by God himself “for our glory before time began.” What has been predestined technically is God’s wisdom; the larger context indicates that Paul has in view God’s gracious activity in Christ, whereby through the crucifixion he determined eternal salvation for his people—including especially the Corinthian believers.

V. 8 repeats the failure of the “rulers” in terms of their responsibility for the crucifixion. God’s wisdom is something that “none of the rulers of this age understood.” The reason for the ruler’s failure is that it was hidden in God and could only be grasped by a revelation of the Spirit (v. 10).

(2:9) However, as it is written: What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived — the things God has prepared for those who love him”—

Paul concludes the argument to this point with scriptural support. It is not clear exactly what OT text Paul is citing. The closest parallels come from Isa 64:4 and 65:16. Paul is saying that the rulers of this age did not understand, *but* it is written that what they did not understand (“no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived”) “God has prepared for those who love him,” that is, all Christians.

(2:10) these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. (2:11) For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.

Paul now explains how it is that “those who love God” understand his “wisdom.” It is because they have the Spirit. The reason the Spirit can reveal these things is because he searches “even the deep things of God,” that is, he knows God fully and completely.

The analogy between man and his spirit and God and his Spirit is just that, an analogy. God’s Spirit is a separate person. For that reason, Paul does not add the phrase “within them” when speaking of God’s Spirit.

(2:12) What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us.

The Corinthians have received the Spirit. Therefore, they should be able to see the wisdom in the gospel.

(2:13) This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.

Paul now returns to his own preaching of God's wisdom, first mentioned in vv. 6 and 7, and links it to the same reception of the Spirit. Thus the "we" is literary, meaning "I." "What things" refers to "what God has freely given us" in v. 12.

(2:14) The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.

With vv. 14–16 Paul now picks up the negative side of this truth. Those who belong to this age are now called "without the Spirit" in contrast to those "with the Spirit" (v. 15). *Psuchikos* refers to unsaved people, those without the Spirit (cf. Jude 19). They are strictly people who know only the "wisdom of this age" (v. 6)

Those "without the Spirit" are described in three ways, each in terms of their relationship—or lack thereof—to the Spirit. First, they do "not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God." Second, the reason for this not accepting is that the things of the Spirit "foolishness" to them. Because they have not received the Spirit their view of everything is from the bottom up, twisted and distorted. Third, they "cannot understand" the very things that the one who has received the Spirit can. Here the emphasis lies on their inability. Again it is "like is known by like" (see v. 11); without the Spirit they lack the one essential "quality" necessary for them to know God and his ways—"because they are discerned only through the Spirit."

"Discerned" means to make appropriate "judgments" about what God is doing in the world; and the person "without the Spirit" obviously cannot do that.

Sometimes Paul's statement that "the person without the Spirit" man cannot "understand" "the things that come from the Spirit of God" is interpreted to mean that the unsaved person cannot understand the gospel message, or the Bible in general. But this is not what Paul is saying. The Bible is written in human language. In that sense, it is no different than any other book. And human beings, including those who are unsaved, can understand human language. But there is something about the Bible, Paul says, that the unsaved person "cannot understand." What is that? It can be helpful to distinguish between the bare grammatical meaning of a text of Scripture and the significance, application, or implication of that text. Paul is not denying that the unbeliever can understand the basic grammatical meaning of a text, only that he will not be able to grasp how that meaning applies, the implications or significance of that meaning. The word "understand" suggests not primarily perceiving or intellectually comprehending in this context, but embracing things as they really are, grasping the truthfulness of them and recognizing them as fact. The problem is not primarily one of cognition, but of evaluation. To "understand" means to evaluate positively.

That the unsaved person does in fact understand the meaning of biblical truth is made clear by the words "considers them foolishness." Compare this with 3:19, "For the

wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight." Obviously, God does not consider the wisdom of this world to be foolishness because he lacks the ability to conceptualize, to comprehend, the wisdom of this world. No, God fully comprehends the wisdom of this world and has judged and evaluated it as being foolish. Likewise, "the person without the Spirit" can grasp the basic meaning of biblical truth, but they cannot correlate it. Instead, they twist and distort it so that it all appears foolish to him. The implications of God's truth find no receptive place in their dark, depraved heart. There is no positive response to God's truth by the unsaved person.

(2:15) The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments,

Verse 15a stands in sharp contrast to the final word about the "person without the Spirit" in v. 14. The "person with the Spirit" can "make judgments about all things." Such a statement of course must not be wrested from its context. It is the Spirit who "searches all things, even the depths of God" (v. 10); therefore, the person who has the Spirit can discern God's ways. Not necessarily all things, of course, but all things that pertain to the work of salvation, matters formerly hidden in God but now revealed through the Spirit.

The person lacking the Spirit cannot discern what God is doing; the one with the Spirit is able to do so because of the Spirit; therefore, the one without the Spirit cannot "examine," or "make judgments" on, the person with the Spirit. The person who belongs to this age is not in a position to judge as "foolish" the person who belongs to the age to come.

(2:16) for, "Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

Verse 16a gives scriptural support for the assertion of v. 15b (Isa 40:13). It serves as a rhetorical question, demanding the answer "No one." Paul is thus asking those without the Spirit how they can expect to know true wisdom, and thereby pass judgment on the one who has the Spirit, when they do not have the mind of the Lord."

In v. 16b Paul responds to his own rhetorical question in the first part of the verse. "But," in contrast to those who lack the Spirit and thereby do *not* know the mind of the Lord, "we have the mind of Christ."

Let us then summarize Paul's argument. Paul began by insisting that his message was in fact an expression of wisdom—God's own wisdom, revealed as such by the Spirit. He at least—in contrast to the mere human being without the Spirit—understands the mind of Christ. As those who possess the Spirit, the Corinthians also potentially possess that same mind. However, as he will now point out, they are hindered by their worldly (carnal) mindset.

c. On being spiritual and divided, 3:1–4

The argument that began as a rebuke against quarrels and division (1:10–13) looks like it may have gone astray in what followed in 1:17–2:16. However, the long discussion of wisdom and the cross is not a digression, but almost certainly the real issue.

Paul has two concerns in this paragraph, both noted in the title given to this section: "On Being Spiritual and Divided." For Paul, these are mutually exclusive options. The problem is that the Corinthians think of themselves as the one—"spiritual"—while in fact

they are the other—“divided.” Thus, Paul does two things, which flow directly out of 2:6–16 and lead directly into 3:5–17. First, picking up the idea of being people with the Spirit from what has just preceded, Paul makes a frontal attack and pronounces the Corinthians as not acting like people with the Spirit. Indeed, they are just the opposite; they are “worldly”—still thinking like the unsaved, who do not have the Spirit. Paul is not suggesting classes of Christians or grades of spirituality, but wants to get them to stop *thinking* like the people of this present age. Second, he wants them to stop *behaving* like the people of the present age. Their behavior is that of unsaved people. Paul, of course, does not mean to say the Corinthians are unsaved, that they do not have the Spirit. They do have the Spirit; and that’s the problem, because they are thinking and behaving otherwise.

(3:1) Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. (3:2a) I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it.

Paul now proceeds to apply the argument of 2:6–16 to the Corinthian situation. The use of the words “brothers and sisters” and the second person plural pronouns throughout make it clear that he is not addressing a faction within the congregation, but the church as a whole. Not all may be guilty, but all are defiled by the actions of the many. The past tenses of the verbs indicate that Paul is reflecting on the time of his initial visit. Apparently, the Corinthians had problems with Paul’s message from the very start.

Paul says that he “could not address [them] as people who live by the Spirit.” He does not say they do not have the Spirit, but that he could not speak to them as spiritually mature.

Paul then continues his argument but with new imagery. He calls them mere “infants in Christ.” The Corinthians think of themselves as “spiritual,” and are in one sense—they do have the Spirit; yet their thinking and behavior demonstrate that they are “worldly” or “fleshly.” And just as they think of themselves as “spiritual,” so too they think of themselves as full-grown, “mature” (2:6).

The argument of 2:6–16 implies that for Paul the gospel of the crucified one is both “milk” and “solid food.” As milk, it is the good news of salvation; as solid food, it is understanding that the entire Christian life is based on the same reality. Thus, the Corinthians do not need a change in diet but a change in perspective.

(3:2b) Indeed, you are still not ready. (3:3) You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?

Paul now moves to their present situation. As proof that they cannot even now understand the true nature of the gospel as truly “spiritual” people should, he confronts them with their present “jealousy and quarreling.”

The sentence concludes with a rhetorical question that brings all of this into perspective. “For inasmuch as there are in fact rivalry and quarreling among you, is this not clear evidence that you are yet living from the point of view of the unsaved?” Those who do not have the Spirit are mere humans; thus, they consider the cross foolish. At the same time their behavior stems from a merely human, thoroughly self-centered point of view. The Corinthians have the Spirit, but are behaving precisely like people who do not, like “mere humans.”

(3:4) For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings?

Paul brings the argument back to where it began in 1:10–12. Just as he noted in 1:11–12, the Corinthians' slogans specifically illustrate their quarrels and these are the evidence that they are walking according to the flesh (v. 3).