

The Wise the Mighty and the Noble  
*God's Kingdom Reversal*



Phillip Michael Garner

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**1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:18-2:5**

Phillip Michael Garner



## Introduction

It has often been said it is helpful when reading the epistles of the New Testament to imagine hearing only one side of a telephone conversation. This is followed by reading between the lines to assist in the interpretive process. The advice is sound, helpful, and even necessary, for interpretation. However the interpreter's argument must be based upon critical methods lest his/her conclusions fall prey to the inventiveness (and biases) of their imagination.<sup>1</sup>

I do not find the major concern of Paul in this particular text to be rebuttal of a gnostic wisdom theology, or that gnosticism was a problem at Corinth as it was at Colossae.<sup>2</sup> The piece gives no indication of false teaching or of false teachers as cause to the party 'spirit' that he addresses. The text contains no terms (such as 'fullness'), or phrases (as objects of rebuttal), that would indicate any problem with a 'gnosis' theology. Rather, Paul's purpose is to confront the disunity born of the diverse social stratification of the church at Corinth.

Chapter 2:3 reveals how Paul approached the Corinthians in proclaiming the 'word of the cross'.

1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 2:3

*And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling,*

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 2:3 reveals how Paul approached the Corinthians in proclaiming the 'word of the cross'.  
1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 2:3 And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling.  
The current trend to identify chiasmic structures (without defined perimeters) is often an example of the intrusion of imaginative inventiveness over the original author's intent.

<sup>2</sup> See W. Schnithals, "Gnosticism in Corinth" (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), for an example of a biblical polemic against gnosticism see Ralph P. Martin, "Colossians The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty," (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers 1972), Pp 4-20.

Paul does not come to Corinth wearing the credentials afforded to him through birth and education. He came as a ‘servant’ to both God and men. However, Paul did depend upon the ‘wise, the mighty, and the noble’ to assist him in his work as an apostle.

Ben Witherington writes, ‘. . . early Christianity was led and largely supported by an elite minority who were of the higher social strata.’<sup>3</sup> It seems to me to be pointless to attempt to argue contrary to Witherington’s observation due to the amount of direct witness within the New Testament epistles.

Paul’s instructions concerning the “Lord’s Supper” in 1 Cor. 11 confirm the existence of class struggle within the Corinthian church. The powerless at Corinth have been divided like political groups each identifying with their own leader, (1st Cor. 1:12). Since it is not Paul, Apollos, Cephas or Christ (Cor. 1:12) that is leading these groups it is apparent that they are being led by someone capable (possibly a patron). 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians is a picture of the church politic where the word of the cross and the unifying power of God are arrested by political divisiveness.

The wisdom corpus found in the Old Testament is not an issue in 1 Cor. 1:18-2:5. Paul’s identification of Jesus as the wisdom of God, (Cor. 1:24, 30) is the only linking of thought with the OT wisdom corpus.<sup>4</sup> Even these verses when taken within their setting,

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<sup>3</sup> See Ben Witherington, “The Paul Quest,” (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press 1998). Pg. 93.

<sup>4</sup> I will argue this point further later in the essay.

<sup>5</sup> Wisdom in Proverbs 8 does not directly participate in creation she only observes, whereas in 1 Cor. 8:6 ‘all things’ are through the Lord Jesus Christ - revealing Jesus’ participation in creation. 1 Cor. 8:6 has been referred to as Paul’s splitting of the Shema, (Deut. 6:4) thus Paul remains a monotheist, and Jesus is embraced into a monotheistic confession. Lady wisdom is a personified metaphor, she is an attribute of God, whereas Jesus is the ‘image of the invisible God’ (Col. 1:15). Israel’s understanding of wisdom is subjected to the progressive element of God’s ‘salvation history’. Christians find wisdom’s embodiment in the life and person of the Lord Jesus Christ, (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 1:30). In 1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 1:24 Christ is called both the power and the wisdom of God. In 1 Cor. 1:18 the ‘word of the cross’ is referred to as the power of God. The event and the person are not to be separated, (Philippians 2:5-11), nor is the revelation of wisdom to be separated from the event that is the life of Christ. The life of Christ continues beyond the death and resurrection, so Paul uses the phrase ‘in Christ’, and wisdom continues to be accessible to believers, (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 2:6-16).

place the emphasis upon the embodying of God's wisdom within the life and person of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

God has revealed that God's wisdom is unattainable through dialectic philosophy or rhetorical speech. The wisdom of God accessible to humanity is revealed through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

Paul the letter writer is not writing to Israel, rather he is writing to a diverse group of people in the City of Corinth. When writing to his 'hearers' at the church in Corinth Paul must consider the Hellenization of his world in thought, the Roman domination of his world politically and the Jewishness of his Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Paul is aware of both his 'hearers' and of the power of his message. He is neither sage nor philosopher, rather he is an apostle. He is a man with a revelation and an indomitable conviction who is sent to preach (proclaim) the truth that God has done in Christ.

### **The Word of the Cross**

**18** *For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,*

*but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

The first verse of the exegesis is built around one phrase, 'the word of the cross'. Paul is stating that the 'word of the cross' is the focal point around which all else transpires. He divides humanity into two groups *the perishing* and *the being saved*.

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<sup>6</sup> This statement is not meant to eradicate the wisdom found in the OT sage's attempts to discern the voice of God in their world, but to include Christ as the interpretive lens for understanding their efforts.

<sup>7</sup> Since only ten percent (+ or -) of people were literate, Paul's letter is meant to be read, and if you will even performed, thus he is writing to his 'hearers'.

*Perishing* ἀπολλυμένοις is a present participle and reflects a continuing condition, however being saved σωζομένοις is a passive present participle and reflects a process that is being acted upon. The significance is the ones who recognize the word of ‘the cross’ as the power of God are being acted upon by God’s power, but the perishing do not respond to the active saving power. Paul is applying the word of the cross into the party-driven and divisive spirit of Corinth that is clinging to the world’s systems and standards.

Paul’s use of the passage from Isaiah 29:14 in 1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 1:19 is not directed towards the wisdom corpus of Israel, but the educated (the wise), the literate (the scribe), and those versed in the power of rhetoric (the debater of this age) (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 1:20).

**19** *For it is written.*

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.*

Paul’s partial use of Isaiah 29:14 is more homiletic than exegetic.<sup>8</sup> Paul is leading the reader (hearer) towards a reversal of the former age, and the world’s social customs. In the new age brought by the event of the cross the power of God redefines what and who is wise, mighty and noble.

Before proceeding I will list the categories of wisdom as found in the text.

### **Verse 19 —the wisdom of the wise**

In verse 20 Paul identifies the wise that he refers to in the Isaiah quote of verse 19.

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<sup>8</sup> If however, Paul expects some to study his letter with greater scrutiny there arises an interesting verbal link. The Hebrew word for ‘wonderful’ אֲלֹהִים as used in Isaiah 29:14 is also used in only two other places in Isaiah, one of which is Isaiah 9:6. In Isaiah 9:6 the one called wonderful is the one on whose shoulders all government rests — especially the governing of his church.

The educated (the wise), the literate (the scribe), and those versed in the power of rhetoric (the debater of this age) (1st Cor. 1:20). These groups could not predict the word of the cross, nor are they the majority amongst those who believe (1st Cor.1 :26).

### **Verse 20 — the wisdom of the world**

The wisdom of the world is that wisdom practiced by the group identified in verse 20. The wisdom of the wise and the wisdom of the world are synonymous in this text.

### **Verse 24 — the wisdom of God**

The wisdom of God is embodied in the incarnate Christ, exhibited in his life, and inseparable from the power of God that works to save those who believe the word of the cross. The wisdom of God is communicated through the life of Christ and his obedience unto death. The communication of God's wisdom is done in an indirect manner and limited to man's finite ability to receive God's wisdom.<sup>9</sup>

### **Verse 30 — our wisdom**

The believer's wisdom is not found in socio-economic alliances, but in Christ Jesus. It is the 'word of the cross' that brings people into the wisdom that is found in Christ. Wisdom has been delivered to those who believe in the person of Christ, and is revealed by his life, and more precisely his death upon a cross.

Paul asks in the last line of verse 20; Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? The question is rhetorical and through it Paul has just referred to all those who lead the Corinthian factions as foolish. The system of patron client, rich and poor, wise and foolish, strong and weak, noble born and servant born is being overthrown in the new age of Christ's body.

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<sup>9</sup> God communicates his wisdom to man as man, thus his communication is indirect, and is done through a mediator, yet he is the mediator. See the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2:5-11



**21** *For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.*

In verse 21 the preposition 'in' (ἐν) can be understood as 'in the sphere' of God's wisdom the world existed, or it can mean simply in (or by) God's wisdom. Either way the conclusion is the same - the knowledge of God is found in the '*word of the cross*' and not through the world's wisdom. Truly, the word of the cross is established by Jesus' resurrection and sits in contrast to it, thereby giving the cross the power of its message.

Paul's logic reasons with a stinging bit of irony that God was pleased to save those who believe through the 'folly' of the preaching of the 'word of the cross'.

**22** *For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,*

Verse 22 clarifies that Paul's use of wisdom is oriented towards Greek methods of attaining wisdom (Greek Philosophy) and not Hebrew wisdom literature.

**23** *but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,*

The themes of Paul's writing in verses 22 and 23 are brought out in the gospels.<sup>10</sup> In the gospels the Jewish people are pictured as desiring signs on numerous occasions.<sup>11</sup> Paul's use of Christ crucified as a 'stumbling block' (οἰστροβόλον) is more correctly translated as a 'cause of offense'. The words of warning from Jesus to John the Baptist, "And blessed is he who takes no offense at me," found in Matthew 11:6 reveal that the life and person of Christ were perceived as an offense (σκάνδαλον). Whether scandal or (μωρία) foolishness the preaching of Christ crucified is a problem for human wisdom.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The Textus Receptus and several other later manuscripts replace the word for 'gentiles' with 'Greeks' to maintain a consistency in Paul's word usage. However, the use of 'gentiles' in verse 23 between the use of Greeks in both verses 22 and 24 allows Paul to identify all peoples and include them in his address.

<sup>11</sup> See Matthew 12:39 (all three synoptic writers record this pronouncement story), and John 2:18 where the Jews ask for a sign from Jesus.

<sup>12</sup> There are eleven variant readings that place the word 'human' before or after the word wisdom in 1 Cor. 2:4.

24 *but to those who are called both Jews and Greeks,  
Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

Paul uses the word ‘called’ to identify those who are ‘in Christ’ and have received the ‘word of the cross’. He includes both Jews and Greeks as being ‘called’. In verse 24 Christ is the power of God, the ‘word of the cross’ is also called the power of God in verse 18. Christ and the ‘word of the cross’ are inseparable as are the power of God and the wisdom of God. Both the power of God and the wisdom of God are manifested in Christ, not confined to a past event, but continuing in Christ. Because the power of God and the wisdom of God continue to be revealed in Christ, wisdom and power are likewise found in the ones who are the ‘called’.

25 *for the foolishness of God is wiser than men,  
and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*

God is neither foolish nor weak, Paul uses this verse with a sense of irony. At the same time the ‘*word of the cross*’ (foolishness), is God’s wisdom which is wiser than men, and the ‘*weakness of God*’ (the life of Christ), is stronger than men, stronger than the wise, mighty and noble, stronger than the leaders of the Corinthian (σχίσματα) divisions.

### **The Politics of God — An Inversion of Power**

Wherever position and power exist people will produce a political system to obtain control of the power through position. The church is not immune from such activity, rather she has been plagued by political abuse. Paul in these concluding verses (26-31) of the first chapter of 1 Corinthians will not appeal to church government, but to the spiritual system of God where there is an inversion of power and God is the sole recipient of glory.

In the introduction I argued for the selected passage (1st Cor. 1:18-2:5) to be a response to political divisions within the church. The following observations further contribute to the thesis of political divisions being the problem that drives the response of Paul. 1

Corinthians 4:1-2 speaks of how leaders in the church are to be regarded, and how they are to serve. In the following verses Paul appears to be making reference to an ecclesiastical hearing. Paul will not submit himself to the ‘court’ but puts any judgment off to the last days. In the last part of verse 5 Paul speaks of a time of commendation from God and includes that time of commendation in the eschatological judgment.

Whenever political power rules in the church immoral activities are tolerated because the system gains ascendancy over the message. Chapter 5 of 1st Corinthians demonstrates the rise of immorality within a political church structure. Ongoing events such as attempts to conceal the sexual abuse of children by a priestly clergy are the result of a political system, not a spiritual system. Chapter 6 also depicts events that occur when the Spirit is replaced by the system. In chapter 6 Paul is concerned with the shaming of the church by members that pursue power over one another through the world system.

### **God’s Spiritual System**

**26** *For consider your call, brethren, not many of you were wise **according to worldly standards**, (literally — **according to the flesh**), not many were powerful not many were of noble birth.*

Paul has now set the stage for his appeal to the ‘crowd’. If Paul can teach them correctly concerning the spiritual system of God at work within the world, then the leaders of the Corinthian factions will lose their influence and prevention of the working of God’s Spirit within the people of God. Paul addresses the Corinthians as brethren, and

asks them to observe their constituents that comprise their ‘call’. Paul comments upon his own observations of those that comprise the ‘call’. The number of persons that belong to the social strata of the wise, powerful, and noble born are of the minority. The immediate implication is that God has no preference for men according to the standards and understanding of the world system. Paul will address this in the next line.

*27 but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise,  
God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong,*

*28 God chose what is low and despised in the world,  
even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,*

The wise, powerful, and noble born are listed in a series of three. The design of Paul is to draw the reader back to verse 20 to remind the reader or hearer of his verdict on the wisdom of the world. In verse 27 Paul uses the neuter form of the verb for foolish because he does not want to call the people foolish, but rather he wants to agree with the status of the people’s social standing. Likewise he uses the term ‘call’ to re-enforce the action and choice of God in building his church. Paul’s statements require the questions; How can what is foolish shame the wise? How can what is weak shame the strong? How can what is low and despised even things that are not bring to nothing things that are? The answers follow with obvious response; the foolish must exhibit greater wisdom than the wise, the weak must exhibit greater strength than the strong or powerful, and the masses that are the pawns of the myth of nobility exhibit greater character, greater parentage for God is their source. Since it is God who works to accomplish this inversion of social stratification, no person can assume credit for what God has done (Cor. 4:6,7).

**29** *so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.*

The wisdom of God works contrary to social norms. God is not bound by the world's system. God's ability to work with what is weak and foolish to demonstrate wisdom and strength brings social equality and dignity to all people. In God's wisdom the removal of the myth of nobility (even of kingship) brings a sense of worth to all people.

**30** *He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus,*

*whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption,*

Paul's words in verse 30 serve well to support the idea that the Corinthian divisions are rooted in patron client social practices. Paul teaches that it is God that is the source of life for those in Christ Jesus. Paul also states that God has made Christ Jesus our wisdom. It is apparent that the efforts of the wisdom of the world to know or find God were unsuccessful (1st Cor. 1:21). What does Paul mean that Christ Jesus has been made 'our wisdom'? A notable observation from the text is that the wisdom in verse 30 is a collective wisdom not an individual wisdom. A collective wisdom requires the members of the group for expression. The wisdom of verse 30 is also found incarnate in the person of Christ Jesus. Paul however adds that Christ Jesus is also our righteousness and sanctification and redemption incarnate. The incarnation of each of the listed items however was accomplished by God that 'made' (indicative aorist passive) them of Christ Jesus. The language requires the process of life experienced by Jesus in order for him to become for us the incarnation of the listed items.

**31** *therefore, as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord."*

The partial quotation of Jeremiah 9:24 is preceded by an oracle of Yahweh that includes the social categories found in 1 Cor. 1:26.

**Jeremiah 9:23**

*Thus says the LORD; “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches;*

The abbreviated quote of Jeremiah 9:24 is both significant and fitting, not only because of the preceding verse, but also because verse 24 is a call for the wise, mighty, and rich (noble born) to practice a system of social justice based upon the love of Yahweh.

Through use of the quote from Jeremiah, Paul has questioned the relationship of the faction leaders with God.

**Jeremiah 9:24**

*“. let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that lam the LORD who practices stedfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the LORD.”*

The faction leaders fail to manifest the rule of God, they glory in their position, and fail to please God.

**Paul’s Leadership at Corinth**

Paul will now compare his ministry and rule against the faction leaders in 1 Cor. 2:1-5, without any examples from the actions of the faction leaders. In 2:1 as in 1:26 Paul addresses his hearers as ‘brethren’.

*2:1 When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom.*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The word ‘testimony’ has an early variant reading of ‘mystery’ found in P46 and other early documents. See Bruce Metzger, “A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., “ (New York, United Bible Societies, 1971).



The testimony of God proclaimed to the Corinthians by Paul is the ‘word of the cross’ found in 1:18. As I stated in the introduction, Paul does not come to Corinth wearing the credentials afforded to him through birth and education. Nor does Paul depend upon rhetorical skills or reasoned arguments. Paul’s testimony is God’s testimony, Jesus Christ and him crucified.

*2:1 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

Paul’s approach to bringing the testimony of God is as a servant.

*2:3 And I was with you in weakness and in much fèar and trembling;*

Paul is teaching that the Spirit of God accompanies clear communication of the ‘word of the cross’ and a servant attitude.

*2:4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power,*

The people of Corinth have placed their faith in men and the world system, but Paul redirects their faith to rest in God.

*2:5 That your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.*

### **Conclusion**

The people of God are still prone to the seduction of human personality and presentation. Although client patron issues are not as predominate in our society they still have influence in the church today. Likewise the power of politics within the church structure still cripples the ministry of the Spirit of God to the people of God.

Paul has carefully written a piece of scripture that seeks to return all the participants of the Corinthian church to the power of God found in the word of the cross. The theology of 1st Cor. 1:26 —31 in particular (drawn from Jeremiah 9:23-24) is a powerful

commentary upon the working manifestation of God within the church. Paul's rejection of worldly wisdom is replaced with a corporate wisdom that is found 'in Christ Jesus'. Paul avoids direct confrontation in this segment of his letter. He seeks to instruct both segments of society, patron and client. Paul uses his own ministry as a model for church leaders in 2:1-5. The teaching of Paul and the message contained in 1 Cor. 1:18-2:5 is perennial in content due to the propensity of human beings to depend upon the world system over faith in God.

Salvation is an ongoing work that lifts the foolish, the weak, the poor from obscurity into a spiritual body where the admirable traits of wisdom, influence (power) and flourishing abounds in their lives. Collectively, as the body of Christ, they possess power to aid one another, educate their children, and produce a community of mutual sharing and interdependence.

Schismatic division is rooted in structures of power that perpetuate the systems of the world. Paul's life models servitude to Christ Jesus, the kind that opens the eyes of the masses to this one truth; servants of Christ unite the body through sacrificial acts of love. We are unfit to rule over one another, we were created to serve one another rather than serve power, greed, and ego.

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