

1 CORINTHIANS NOTES ON CHAPTER TWO

Paul now makes clear that his presentation of God's eternal plan of salvation (v. 7) is based, through the Holy Spirit, on the wisdom of God revealed to Paul and to others, a wisdom to be understood by those who are God's people. The work of the Holy Spirit is stressed repeatedly in chapter 2. Yet it is a chapter explicit with the doctrine of the Trinity: e.g. 2:2, 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' - 2:8, 'the Lord of glory' - 2: 16, 'the mind of Christ' - while God as such is mentioned in 2:1, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 14. The other primary truth embedded in the chapter is the close relationship between the cross and the Spirit. One commentator called these two 'inseparable bedfellows,' and the whole discussion of wisdom in chapters 1 and 2 makes that very plain. God's wisdom is revealed in Jesus Christ and him crucified, and this wisdom is revealed by its original witnesses through the ministry of the Spirit (2:10 and 13).

Paul now returns to the manner of his own preaching introduced in 1: 17. He argues that since salvation is attained not through human wisdom or might but only through the cross, he came to Corinth in dependence on the Holy Spirit as he simply preached Christ and the efficacy of his death. This was no new policy on his part, adopted because of the ill success of another approach at Athens (Acts 17:22-31): it was his regular practice (Gal. 3: 1.) verses 1-5 are replete with themes from 1:17-25. v. 1- *Not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, (1:17); v. 2 – Jesus Christ and His crucified, (1:25); v. 4 – preaching was not in persuasive words of wisdom, (1:17), but in demonstration of power (1:23-25); v. 5 – that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of man, but in the power of God, (1:15).* The first two verses, which pick up the language of 1:17 and 23, remind them of the *content* of his preaching, but now emphasizing that it was a deliberate act on his part. Yet 3-4 remind them of the *form* of the preacher and his preaching, which bears the same character as the message itself – “weakness.” Nonetheless, in this

weakness, as in 1:22-25, the power of God is at work, now expressed in terms of the Spirit.

In verses 1-5, Paul recalls his arrival at Corinth in much fear and trembling (3), such was the reputation of the city and his own sense of vulnerability at all levels. This may refer to reaction after his recent experiences in Macedonia and Athens and concern for his friends in Thessalonica, whom he had been compelled to leave so precipitously (1 Thess. 3:1-5), but more to a sense of complete personal inadequacy in view of the task of evangelizing such a city as Corinth. This is the background of the encouragement given to Paul in Acts 18:9ff. He made a conscious, deliberate and determined decision to abandon any natural or worldly wisdom, and to concentrate on Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 – 2). There is a tie to

v. 31. In the cross and in choosing you, God in effect eliminated human boasting, so that the only boast left is in the Lord. *And I, for my part*, when I came to you, did not depend on overpowering oratory or philosophical argument. The plausible persuasiveness of the contemporary philosopher was rejected. Paul came with fear and trembling recognizing the importance of preaching the eternal gospel. Instead Paul relied on and was in his own person a demonstration of the power of the Spirit (4). Though he came in an unostentatious way, he came in a demonstration of power. That decision ensured that the consequent results in the lives of transformed Corinthians rested securely, not . . . in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God (5). Paul may have in mind some visitors to Corinth after his departure who tried to improve upon his work. Paul did not want their faith to be superficial, based on misdirected belief coming from human wisdom, but a real Christian faith generated by the power of God. “The faith,” here with the definite article is not to be taken just as the act of believing but as the substance of their belief based on the person and work of Christ. It might be paraphrased, “their Christian faith.”

This paragraph provides the perfect touchstone for all preaching, as much as in what Paul rejected as in what he determined to pursue. There are searching questions here for the preacher. Is our preaching genuine proclamation? Do we proclaim the mighty acts whereby God has borne witness to himself in Jesus? Do we obscure our proclamation with lofty words (1) or anything else? Have we made a firm decision to make Jesus Christ and him crucified both the theme of our preaching and the center of our living? Do we experience proper tentativeness and do we taste our own vulnerability as preachers of the gospel in a pagan, hostile world? Does our preaching demonstrate the power of the Spirit? Do the results of our preaching demonstrate the power of the Spirit? Are people's lives being changed? Do they know the power of the Spirit in their own lives?

At verse 6 Paul's language and direction alter. From 1:18 he has been painting in vivid colors the contrast between the wisdom of the world and God's wisdom. He has exposed the emptiness of all man-made and man-centered schemes of salvation. He has effectively emptied such human wisdom of all ultimate value and of any consequent attractiveness. The net impact might well have been the conclusion that Paul was not interested in wisdom of any kind - none except the 'foolishness' of the gospel. The single word *yet* (6, RSV) therefore introduces Paul's riposte to any such conclusion: yet among the mature we do impart wisdom. It is a higher wisdom discernable by those who are mature (*teleioi*) - those who have attained the goal and are spiritually mature.

As with much of 1:18 - 2:5, the argument of this paragraph is full of bite. - The Corinthians, enamored by wisdom and thinking of themselves as "spiritual," are less than enchanted with Paul's message, which they regard as mere "milk." With fine irony Paul demolishes these various misconceptions and false boastings. The gospel of the crucified Messiah is wisdom all right, he affirms, but not of the kind they are now pursuing. True wisdom is indeed for those who are "spiritual," for those who have the Spirit, who has revealed what God has really accomplished in

Christ. They should have been able to see the cross for what it is - God's wisdom - and thereby have been able to make true judgments. By pursuing *sophia* they are acting just like those without the Spirit who are likewise pursuing wisdom, but who see the cross as foolishness. The net result - and the irony - is that they are "spiritual," yet "unspiritual"; they are pursuing "wisdom," yet missing the very wisdom of God.

It is important to note the switch in 2:6 from the first person singular (2: 1--5, "I") to the first person plural (2:6-16, "we"). This is even more notable because Paul reverts to "I" from 3:1 onward. One explanation of this change is that Paul is referring in this paragraph to the normal practice of the apostles, including himself, in teaching the church: *i. e.* the apostles normally taught spiritual truth to spiritual people in the power of the Spirit (*cf.* verse 13); but the immaturity, indeed the infantile condition, of the Corinthians precluded such teaching in their case. If this is the proper interpretation, the difficult and challenging phrase in verse 16, "we have the mind of Christ," becomes a claim made by the apostles in their unique role in building the church.

It has been argued that there is no particular significance in the switch from "I" to "we" and back to "I." It is then suggested that Paul is describing the norm in most churches, stressing the wealth of divine wisdom available to those who are not immature like the Christians at Corinth. Those who are "spiritual" and press forward in experiencing through the Spirit all that God has given to us in Jesus (*cf.* verse 12) can then say, with Paul, we have the mind of Christ.

In verse 6 Paul reasserts that God's wisdom is not a wisdom of this age. It does not originate in this passing world, nor does it reveal the characteristics of the world, nor can it be obtained through worldly acumen. The phrase *of this age* comes again in 1:20 and 3:18. Because this age is *doomed to pass away*, any worldly wisdom will show all the inbuilt characteristics of this age. This wisdom,

which comes from or is seen mainly in the rulers of this age, will pass away as they will, because they are mortal, temporary and fleeting.

What does Paul mean by *the rulers of this age* (6 and 8)? It could be earthly rulers, such as Pilate and Caiaphas, representing Roman and Jewish wisdom; or it could refer to demonic powers. Without ever identifying demonic powers with the power structures and human rulers of the world, the Bible nevertheless strongly suggests a world view in which the powers of evil manifest their grip particularly in situations where human power is most effectively wielded. Paul seems, therefore, to be indicating that the most influential human wisdom is that which controls the decisions and actions of those in authority. Yet even that immensely powerful wisdom passes away, as the rulers who imbibe and express it pass away.

Even such influential wisdom pales into insignificance in the face of God's *secret and hidden wisdom* (7). God's wisdom is contained in a mystery not fully revealed, but which God had planned before the beginning of the ages. This plan originated in God's mind, and though outlined in the OT, is not as fully explained and understood there as it is in the NT. This wisdom has been revealed, embodied and made available in Jesus Christ.

This is enlarged upon in Eph. 3:2-12, where the "mystery of Christ, . . . hidden for ages in God" is now divulged as "the manifold wisdom of God. . . to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. . . according to the eternal purpose which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord." Some suggest that it is in the Ephesian letter that *the secret and hidden wisdom of God*, on which Paul does not enlarge here to the Corinthians, is imparted "among the mature."

If the rulers of this age had perceived the true identity of Jesus, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory (8), thus insuring their own doom (*cf.* Col. 2:15, where the passion of Christ is portrayed as his victorious struggle against aggressive "principalities and powers." A hint of this probably appears here and

there in the gospels (*cf.* Luke 22:53, the power of darkness; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11, the ruler of this world.)) That ignorance, that blindness, that destructiveness reveal the full folly of human wisdom. Paul here ties together Christ's divinity (*Lord of Glory*) and his human nature (he was crucified in a real body on a hard, real cross), leading to the conclusion that God the Son as incarnate in man died on the cross (Acts 20:28).

In the remarkable phrase in verse 7, where Paul describes God's wisdom as that which God decreed before the ages for our glorification, we have a perspective from eternity to eternity. In brief, Paul is saying that in his wisdom God decided on Jesus Christ and him crucified as the way of salvation long before time and space began, long before he created us in his own image (before the ages). More than that, from eternity he planned to bring all his "saints" to share his glory.

It is most important to note that "the mystery" of which Paul speaks here is not something additional to the saving message of Christ crucified: it is in Christ crucified that the wisdom of God is embodied. It consists rather in the more detailed unfolding of the divine purpose summed up in Christ crucified. We never, therefore, move on from the cross of Christ only into a more profound understanding of the cross. Paul does not have a simple gospel of the cross for babes, and a different wisdom-gospel for the mature. All Christians are potentially mature in Christ, though only some are actually what all ought to be.

This *secret and hidden wisdom of God* is, therefore, nothing more or less than *Jesus Christ and him crucified*. Though hidden and secret for generations, he has now been revealed as the Son of God and as the Savior of the world. The word *secret* (Greek *mysterion*) has a double stress: mere man cannot penetrate the secret. It remains *secret and hidden* to those who still rely on human wisdom. The three great sources of human knowledge -- seeing, hearing and thought -- alike fail

here. Hitherto this wisdom has been a mystery, -- a thing hidden. Now God has himself revealed it. He has revealed it *through the Spirit* (9-10) to the apostles and to us through them. This is the doctrine of inspiration.

It is written, though often used to cite OT passages might merely mean “to use the language of Scripture,” or “to speak generally from Scripture” (*cf.* John 1:45), without meaning that the passage is formally cited. The first two lines of the quotation and the last line are a loose reference to Isaiah 64:4, whereas the third line may be merely a thought from the OT generally as summarized by Paul.

In a few deft strokes Paul has given the immature Corinthians a glimpse of God’s glorious wisdom. [Several commentators (e.g. Dods and Bruce) think that Paul expands *this* wisdom more fully in Ephesians, especially 3:1-13.] He longs for them to show that maturity which would liberate him to expound his wisdom to them. The word *mature* (6) is one of Paul’s favorite and important words. It was used in the Greek mystery-religions of the “initiated,” but Paul has in mind that growth up into mature manhood by the whole church which is the goal of his entire ministry. [*cf.* Eph. 4:13; Col. 1:28.] A key passage is Philippians 3:8-15, which we can effectively summarize as follows: “I want to know Christ; I have not yet fully reached that point; but I am straining forwards to reach that goal; I forget where I have been before, I am striving forwards. . . and anyone who is mature will have precisely the same attitude.” In a word, for Paul, to be mature is to know that he has not yet arrived and to press forward. In this sense, the newest Christian can be “mature” and old timers can often get into a rut and stop moving on in the Lord. Maturity is, therefore, a process, not a plateau.

Perhaps the key to this process of maturing comes in the last phrase of verse 9, where Paul affirms that the Holy Spirit reveals the wisdom of God to those who love him. For the Corinthians, knowledge mattered more than love; for Paul, the key to knowing all that God has prepared for us is in loving him.

Apparently the quotation contained in verse 9 (which is mainly from Isaiah 64 and 65) came to be a watch-word of the Gnostics in later years, as they laid claim to superior knowledge and standing before God. Paul is making it clear that such wisdom is open to all, and the way in is to love God. If one loves God, one is known by him. (1 Cor. 8:3.)

In verses 10-16, Paul explains in some detail the ministry of the Holy Spirit in revealing to us Jesus as the wisdom of God. *But God has revealed it unto us by His spirit*, that is, to Paul and the other apostles. The verb Paul uses (*apokalupto*, to reveal) is a strong term, usually used in the NT to indicate divine revelation of certain supernatural secrets (Mt. 16: 17; Luke 10:22), or used in an eschatological sense of the revelation connected with certain persons and events (Rom 8: 18; 1 Cor 3: 13). Note that throughout vv 10-16 Paul speaks mostly in the first person plural, “we,” not “you,” strengthening the interpretation that he is speaking primarily to divine revelation given to apostles. In 1 Cor. 3:1-3 Paul returns to addressing the Corinthians as “you.” This ministry is essential because, without it, we could never understand the thoughts of God (11). The Spirit *searches . . . even the depths of God*, and he enables all believers (*i.e.* all who have received the Spirit, 12) to come to know, to impart, and to interpret all that God has given us in Jesus (12-13).

The spiritual wisdom and truth of God can only be revealed through the Holy Spirit, just as human wisdom needs the human spirit to understand it. The concept of “spirit” in this verse requires a real personality who thinks and acts - not a force. The analogy cannot be pressed too far. It does not teach that God’s spirit is within him in the sense that man’s spirit is within him, but that as the human spirit knows and understands human wisdom, so, the Spirit of God, being God himself, understands the wisdom of God.

It is in this section (12-13) of the paragraph (2:6-16) that the “we” vocabulary most naturally refers to the specific ministry of Paul and his fellow-apostles. The apostolic teaching about the salvation of God in Jesus has unique authority of the kind described in verse 13: we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit. As well as rejecting once again the eloquence of worldly wisdom, Paul here maintains that his teaching, in its language as well as in its substance, is supplied by the Holy Spirit. The words he uses verbalize the thoughts of God, and thereby are enshrined by the authority of God.

Paul states (v. 12) that it is the Spirit of God they have received, in contrast to some other kind of spirit through which some might try to know God’s wisdom and truth - whether the spirit of the wisdom of this world (1 Cor. 1:20; 2:6; 3:19) or another kind of spirit (*cf.* 1 John 4:2-6). The purpose of the Spirit’s special work of revelation is that we may understand what God has freely given us. (See Rom 8: 15 - not the spirit of slavery, but the spirit of sonship, and 2Tim 1:7 - not a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control.)

In v. 13 Paul reverts to the nature of his own ministry (vv. 4, 5). He wants it known that he speaks not in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught by the spirit.

V. 15 - is judged of no one. Elsewhere in this letter this is spelled out in practical terms, as when Paul says (4:3ff), “with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. . . . It is the Lord who judges me”. It is plain throughout that Paul recognizes the value of self-judgment (11:31), constructive criticism (11:17ff.), and community discipline (5:3ff); but ultimately the man of God is answerable to God alone, and in any case he cannot be assessed at all by those who have not the same Spirit as he has received.

We can begin to see why Paul must have felt so frustrated by the sheer fleshliness, or carnality, of the Christians at Corinth. They, like all Christians, had access to the very mind of Christ (16); but they were precluding themselves from the privilege of being able, by the work of the Spirit, to judge all things (15) through God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, the very wisdom of God. Vast tracts of human experience, endeavor, and adventure lay beyond the grasp of these Christians at Corinth, so long as they remained unspiritual (14). The Greek word here is *psychikos*, which refers to "everything that belongs to our heritage from the first Adam" who was made a living *psyche* (cf. 15:45). Paul is saying that Christian believers can revert to behaving like unbelievers. When a person has been born again by the Spirit of God, he becomes potentially a "spiritual man," but he is not automatically going to continue walking in the Spirit.

We must beware any tendency to sit back on our haunches and to feel that we have "arrived." We must determine to love God with every fiber of our being. We must link closely with our fellow-believers in the body of Christ, because to have the mind of Christ is essentially a corporate experience: "we have the mind of Christ" (16). As we pursue these priorities, the Spirit will unfold to us more and more of the wisdom of God in Jesus Christ, our crucified and risen Lord.