

Lesson 6

Notes on 1 Corinthians 3:16-23

In v. 16 Paul begins by using a rhetorical device that occurs here for the first time in Paul: "Do you not know that...?" He will use this device ten times in this letter [3: 16; 5:6; 6:2, 3, 9,15, 16, 19; 9: 13, 24], chiefly in contexts where he is exercised, and that it occurs only one other time in his letter [Rom. 6:16], probably says much about his feeling toward the Corinthians and their behavior. Given their own emphasis on wisdom and knowledge, this may be more than simply a rhetorical device here, moving closer to irony or sarcasm: "Can it be that you who boast in *gnosis* do not know that?" "Do you not know who you are," he asks them. And it is clear from their current behavior that they do not know, or at least have not seriously considered the implications of who they are as God's people in Corinth.

The imagery of the church as God's temple, which occurs twice more in Paul [2 Cor. 6: 16; Eph. 2:21], was full of meaning for both Jews and Gentiles. The word used (*naos*) refers to the actual sanctuary, the place of the deity's dwelling, in contrast to the word *hieron*, which referred to the temple precincts as well as to the sanctuary. For the Gentiles, who were practicing pagans [6:9; 8:7], most of them would have frequented the many pagan temples and shrines in their city. Indeed some of them were arguing for the right to do so still [see chaps 8 10]. But now Paul is calling their attention to the fact that since there is only one God, he can have only one temple in Corinth, and they are it. They became that new temple by the fact that the Spirit of God lives in their midst. That is, Paul is here reflecting on the church as the corporate place of God's dwelling, who, when gather in Jesus name, experienced the presence and power of the Lord Jesus in their midst [5:4-5].

v. 17 - As God's temple in Corinth, the church was to be his alternative to Corinth, both its religions and its vices. But the Corinthians, by their worldly wisdom, boasting, and divisions, were in effect banishing the Spirit and thus about to destroy the only alternative God had in their city. Hence, having called attention to who they are, Paul warns those who were thus wreaking havoc in the church. One can scarcely circumvent the awful nature of the warning. Those who are responsible for dismantling the church may ex-

pect judgment in kind; it is difficult to escape the sense of eternal judgment in this case, given its close proximity to vv. 13-15.

Some interpreters are dismayed that Paul can speak of a person within the community as "being destroyed," especially after the provision of escape was given in v. 15. The reason for such a dire threat is given in the final clause: "for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple." The word "sacred" retains the imagery of the temple, which was set apart for God and was not to be desecrated in any way. God is holy; his temple is therefore also holy, set apart for his purposes; and as his temple, you are by implication also to be holy.

We are exposed both to an understanding of the nature of the local church [God's temple indwelt by his Spirit] and the warning of v. 17 makes it clear how important the local church is to God himself.

One of the desperate needs of the church is to recapture this vision of what it is by grace, and, therefore, also what God intends it to be. Seldom does one sense that it is, or can be, experiences as a community that is so powerfully indwelt by the Spirit that it functions as a genuine alternative to the pagan world in which it is found.

4. Worldly wisdom (3:18-23)

Paul now gathers up the various threads of the argument to this point and brings it to a preliminary conclusion, a conclusion that makes certain that the long argument of 1:18--3:4 was not some mere sermonic or rhetorical aside, but rather spoke to the root of the problem of their strife. The paragraph is in two parts (vv. 18-20, 21-23), each marked by an identical opening exhortation ("Let no one. . ."), and each thereby bringing closure to the first two parts of the problem (*quarreling* in the name of their leaders; but doing so under the guise of *wisdom*).

First, he insists that none of them be deceived by what appears to be wisdom but is not. Their *sophia* belongs only to the present age and has no standing whatsoever with God himself; indeed, it is foolishness to him. All of this recalls the argument of 1:18--2:16. This motif in turn is tied to the theme of "boasting" in men, thus picking up the problem of the strife itself, especially as it has been carried on in the name of their vari-

ous leaders. This recalls 3:5-9, which pointed out the folly of following mere men.

As the reason why they must not "boast" in their teachers, Paul turns their slogans end for end. It is not that the Corinthians belong to Apollos or Paul, but that Paul and Apollos – and everything else – belong to the Corinthians; indeed all things are theirs because they are Christ's and Christ is God's. Thus, the main point of 3:5-17 is restated with breathtaking crescendo.

The final paragraph of chapter 3 reverts to the theme of worldly wisdom and the futility of any kind of boasting about powerful personalities as leaders. That is certainly how the world thinks, but *the wisdom of this world is folly with God* (19). Those who are truly wise in God's sight are those who deliberately reject such worldly wisdom and adopt an attitude to people and to things which everyone else will call foolish (18). Those who persist in pursuing *sophia*, who are thereby destroying, not building, the church, are self-deceived and a fearful judgment threatens them. Their present course, because it is the way of deception, will lead ultimately to destruction. Hence, he urges that they abandon it in favor of one that brings them back to God's folly, which is true wisdom.

v. 18 - Following on the heels of the severe warning (v. 17) Paul exhorts, "Let no one delude himself." The opening salvo is irony -- "If anyone of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age." Of course they do; that is the whole point. This same formula will appear three more times in this letter. (8:2; 11:16; 14:37; cf. Gal. 6:3; Phil. 3:4.) In each case the formula introduces a position actually held by his opponents and thus functions as a form of irony to dissuade them, or to get them to hear his argument on the other side. Two of these [8:2; 14:37], along with this one, speak to the heart of the attitudinal problems that plague the church. They think of themselves as wise, as having arrived at knowledge (8:2), and as being spiritual (14:37). That is precisely their problem. And in each case Paul must disabuse them of such opinions; otherwise the church is up for grabs.

They think of themselves as wise. But for Paul such wisdom is strictly "according to the standards of this age." For Paul, this age and its wisdom is under God's judgment and on its way out. In the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has "befooled" wisdom; wisdom is folly, folly is wisdom; weakness is power; leaders are servants; God's

people are nobodies, yet possess all things (vv. 22-23; 2Cor. 6:9-10). Not everything that has been so reversed is now plainly visible; but the cross and resurrection are evidence of its certainty. Therefore, God's people must abandon confidence in the securities of the present age; they must trust in God's folly -- he should become a fool and thereby become truly wise. Nothing new is said here. This is the argument of 1:18--3:4 reinforced.

vv. 19-20 -- Paul now gives the theological basis for the preceding exhortation, plus its scriptural support. He states it in the reverse of 1:18-25. There he set out to demonstrate that "the wisdom of God [Christ crucified] is foolishness to the world." Here he says, "The wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight." Exactly the same point is made, but now in terms of the divine perspective, which ultimately is the only one that counts. They are urged to adopt God's perspective since their wisdom is only folly at best.

And how do we know? There is sufficient evidence from what "is written" that God has always so regarded human efforts to understand his ways. Two texts are cited, Job 5:13 and Ps. 94:11. The citations together illustrate the utter futility of "the wise," hence the fact that their "wisdom is foolishness in God's sight." The first text is expressed in the imagery of hunting, in which the hunter uses the very craftiness or cunning of the prey as the means of capture. The ultimate irony is that people are cunningly avoiding the God with whom they have to do; but God has used that very cunning to ensnare them. Thinking themselves to be wise, they are in fact fools. The second text emphasizes their ultimate futility. God knows their reasonings, that they are futile.

The obvious point for Paul, therefore, is that the Corinthians are themselves fools if they do not take seriously this divine view of things.

v. 21a -- With a final emphatic "so then" Paul brings the present argument to its conclusion. The passage has a grandeur that makes one hesitant to comment on it. He begins with an exhortation (21a), gives the theological basis for it (21b-23), and concludes with a near doxology (23) in which every thing is grounded in the ultimate theological faith -- the unity of God. Before such majesty their divisions and worldly wisdom are altogether silenced and brought to nothing.

The Exhortation -- Let no one boast of men. With these words the appeal of 1:10-12 is finally addressed directly, by the weaving together of two threads: their sloganeering in the name of their teachers (1:12; 3:4), and their boasting, as though they were self-sufficient (1:29, 31). At the same time it flows out of the immediately preceding predicate that God knows the reasonings of the wise to be futile. In light of all that has been said about the power of God's wisdom in the cross, about servant leadership that reflects the character of the cross, about God's contempt for the futility of worldly wisdom -- in light of all that, let no one among you still be bold enough to say "I belong to _____." That is to ground one's confidence in the creature, mere mortals all. Paul will now direct their focus one final time to the Creator, who is God over all.

vv. 21 b- 22 -- Why not boast about men? Because all things are yours. They say they are of Paul; Paul says you are of God. Now he makes the further transformation -- all things are of you, including Paul, Apollos, and Cephas. This turns their slogans completely on their head. It is in Christ, as Eph. 1 says, that God has begun and eventually will bring all things in heaven and earth under one head, even Christ (Eph. 1:10). Therefore, all things are yours.

The list of *all things* begins with three men. It is followed by five items -- world, life, death, present, future -- that are the ultimate tyrannies of the human existence, to which people are in lifelong bondage as slaves. For Paul the death and resurrection of Jesus marked the turning of the ages in such a way that nothing lies outside Christ's jurisdiction. In the form of the cross God has planted his flag on planet Earth and marked it off as his own possession; hence the "world" is his. So also with the whole of existence (life, death), which are immediately placed into the perspective of eternity (present, future). Because in Christ Jesus both life itself and therefore the future are ours, death is ours as well, as is the present. We die, but life cannot be taken from us; we live the life of the future in the present age, and therefore the present has become our own possession. For those in Christ Jesus, what things were formerly tyrannies are now their new birth-right. This is the glorious freedom of the children of God. They are lords of all things, not bound to the whims of chance of the exigencies of life and death. The future is no cause for panic; it is already theirs. In light of such expansive realities, how can the Co-

inthians say, "I am of _____." That is too narrow, too constricted a view. You do not belong to them, they belong to you, as your servants, because you, and they, are Christ's and Christ is God's.

v. 23 -- These final words come close to doxology. They serve as the ultimate theological basis for what has preceded. They are also its proper qualification. It is not that "all things are yours wily-nilly, or selfishly, or in the same sense as they were to the Stoic, who regarded "possession of all things" as making him self-sufficient – and therefore ultimately independent and self-centered. They are yours because you belong to Christ; and all things are his (cf. 15:23-28). Thus, it is *only* in him that the believer possesses all things; but *in him* the believer does indeed possess all things. The [mal crescendo resounds: "And Christ is God's." It is the final note of triumph. God is the ultimate reality, the one who possesses all things and outside of whose ultimate control lies nothing.

On this high note Paul's response to the Corinthian pride in man and wisdom has come to a fitting conclusion. But the problem is larger still; so he turns next to deal with their attitudes toward him in particular. But that is the next chapter.

This attitude sees nothing as grounds for boasting, because everything and everybody is a gift from God to undeserving sinners -- including apostles and teachers like Paul, Apollos and Cephas, not to mention the whole wide world, life and death, the present and the future. That they assign themselves to one of God's servants as their leader demonstrates not only their enslavement to secular fashion, but it also demonstrates their self-impooverishment, for all the servants of God are equally theirs. In fact, all things are theirs because of their union with Christ, who is Lord of all things. They are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17). So it is totally out of place to boast about people and things which, quite undeservedly, have been placed in our laps by a lavishly generous God. Indeed, concludes Paul, the fact that they belong to us as gifts of his grace must be held firmly in the context that we belong to Another – to Christ himself: you are Christ's (23). He brings the argument full circle by stressing also that Christ is God's (23), presumably indicating the dependence of the Son upon the Father and the submission of the Son to the Father. (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28).

The whole paragraph is summarized with these emphatic words everything is God's - the church, its ministry, Paul, Apollos - everything. Therefore, it is absolutely not permissible to say, "I belong to Paul," since the only legitimate "slogan" is "we all belong to God." Paul's point needs to be constantly underscored. The church belongs to its Lord, and to him alone, and its ministers must function in his church in the posture of servants. All too often those "in charge" tend to think of the church as "theirs." They pay lip service to its being "Christ's church, after all," then proceed to operate on the basis of very secular structures, and regularly speak of "my" or "our" church. Nor does the church belong to the people, especially those who have "attended all their lives," or who have "supported it with great sums of money," as though that gave them special privileges. The church belongs to Christ, and all other things - structures, attitudes, decisions, nature of ministry, everything - should flow out of that singular realization.

Moreover, those "in charge" must be ever mindful of who is really in charge. To be a servant does *not* mean the abdication of leadership, nor on the other hand, does it mean to become everyone's errand boy. It has to do with attitude and perspective, not with one's place on the organizational chart.