

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

(SB_1Cor_chp2)

As we observed in our study of chapter 1, after Paul’s opening greeting, he began to immediately address a situation that existed in Corinth – sectarianism. Paul is not addressing the subject of divisions between believers that is driven by a concern for doctrinal purity. To confuse the two is to distort the passage into addressing a topic it does not address. Rather, Paul is addressing the tendency of the Corinthian believers to form allegiances to human leaders that was overshadowing the need for unity in regard to the preeminence of Christ.

The root of this problem resided in self-righteous motivations shaded by the culture of Corinth. Through the emergence of cliques and sectarianism, the believers in Corinth were becoming focused upon superficial matters to the detriment of the big picture – the divine perspective. They were forming allegiances based upon human approbation and power moves instead of focusing on the exaltation of Christ. Paul devotes the bulk of four chapters (1:18-4:21) to this subject.

Why did this problem arise in Corinth? There are several reasons. First, the Corinthians were Greeks and Greek culture valued logic, philosophy and debate – thus, people were used to aligning themselves with different schools of thought led by prominent individuals. Second, these believers had pluralistic cultural baggage that shaped the human viewpoint thinking that needed to be eradicated by adjustment to the Truth in Phase 2 of their Christian lives. Third, after Paul had visited Corinth for 18 months, other prominent Christian leaders visited Corinth who are named, i.e. Apollos and Cephas (Peter).

The presence of such false motivation as a pattern of behavior in these believer’s lives was foundational to all of the other issues that Paul will address in his letters to these believers in Corinth. All of the “carnal” practices of the Corinthian believers reflected the human tendency toward personal approbation as a means of measuring approval from God. In our prior session, we observed a few principles that emerged from this section of Scripture.

Principle: Attempts to establish human power systems through the formation of cliques are driven by insecurity and the desire for approbation from other humans.

Principle: The carnal believer will consciously or unconsciously evaluate his or her status before God based upon his or her perception of how he or she is received by others.

Principle: At the core of Christian integrity is the presence of a desire that Christ be exalted through Christ-like thought and behavior.

We continue our examination of Paul’s comments on this topic in the current session.

1 Corinthians 2

The Simplicity of the Message (2:1-5)

1 And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony [Gr. *musterion* – μυστηριον] of God.
2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.
3 I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,
4 and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in

demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (2:1-5)

We have previously retraced Paul's missionary journey preceding his arrival in Corinth. After crossing the Aegean Sea and first visiting Philippi in Macedonia, we can imagine Paul's state of mind as he traveled to Corinth given all that had preceded his arrival there. He probably wrestled with some mental contradictions between all that he was experiencing and that which he knew was God's will for his life. After receiving direction from the Lord in the form of a vision of a Macedonian man while Paul was at Troas in Asia Minor on the east side of the Aegean Sea (Acts 16:6-10), it had probably not been Paul's expectations that he would be forced to turn south into Achaia (Greece) once he entered Macedonia. However, after receiving this initial direction from the Lord, each city he entered seemed to harbor much opposition and even persecution.

His preaching and teaching in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea resulted in small groups of converts, but certainly did not result in "success" as the world would measure "success," e.g. large numbers of converts, warm embrace of Paul, wide acceptance of his message, lavish provisions poured out upon this servant of God, large numbers of buildings being erected, etc. Instead, Paul was beaten and jailed in Philippi and chased out of Thessalonica and Berea by the Judaizers (see Acts 16:11-17:15).

In Athens, Paul was considered more of an amusement to be used by the intelligentsia and philosophers than taken seriously (Acts 17:16-34). In a sense, Paul's experience in Athens was much less encouraging than Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. At least the reactions he faced in those cities demonstrated that some impact had occurred.

So, when Paul arrived in Corinth, by his own testimony, he indicated that he arrived with much fear and trembling (1 Cor 2:3). Paul had no reason to suppose that Corinth would prove any different than his experience with the other cities during his 2nd Missionary Journey. Paul understood the city's reputation. It was probably for this reason that the Lord reached out to Paul and gave him assurance in a vision shortly after he arrived in Corinth.

9 And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; 10 for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." (Acts 18:9-10)

Paul's point in verses 1-5 is that he did not design the content of his message (Gr. *logos* – λογος) and he did not structure his delivery (Gr. *kerugma* - κηρυγμα) with a desire to impress his hearers with his eloquence or wisdom. This was and has been the style of orators throughout history (including as an example our country's own founding fathers during the debates that occurred in the Continental Congress).

Paul's desire was to insure that the focus was upon the objective Truth that he proclaimed. This objective Truth was of infinite value in contrast to the superficial focus of these believers – a focus upon the style, flair, popularity, rhetorical eloquence, etc. of the messenger.

Paul's preaching was a ministry, not a performance. Paul knew that the Holy Spirit was responsible for convincing people of the Truth – his only responsibility was to be clear in its presentation. The "wisdom" of the preacher or orator was not the issue.

Indirectly, Paul is providing a warning against the tendency of listeners and of speakers toward an ever-so-subtle, superficial focus of attention upon human talents and skills in a manner that detracts from a focus upon the power of Christ. Paul does not teach against these things; rather, his point is to put them in proper perspective.

The Paradox of God's Wisdom As Mere Foolishness (2:6-16)

6 Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; 7 but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; 8 the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; 9 but just as it is written,

"THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD,
AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN,
ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM."

10 For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. 11 For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, 13 which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. 14 But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. 15 But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised 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.

Paul's logic followed a natural progression. If believers erroneously focus upon the superficial, worldly capabilities of men, then they will miss the wisdom of God – a wisdom that transcends human ability and power. Men pass away along with any skills, talent and abilities they may possess. The prominent members of society in any given age are so easily forgotten by subsequent generations. The one thing that endures is the Truth of God's wisdom – wisdom that transcends time in its simplicity. Let us note some things from this passage:

- Contrast between those who receive God's wisdom and those who do not (2:6-10a):
 - Paul indicates that the wisdom that is eternal in nature will only be fully comprehended by those who are "mature."
 - The word used for wisdom is the Greek word *sophia* (Gr. σοφία).
 - The idea that seems to be conveyed by this Greek word is the ability to match theory and the practical, i.e. the ability to translate knowledge of Truth into one's practical life circumstances.¹
 - Only the "mature" (Gr. *teleios* – τέλειος) have embraced *sophia* that is of God versus of the world.
 - By making the contrast between a *sophia* of God and a *sophia* of the world, Paul acknowledges that there are competing systems of wisdom – competing systems of addressing the circumstances and exigencies of life.

¹ See Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1985; published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996) for an extended analysis of this Greek word throughout secular, Jewish and early Church history under the Apostle Paul.

- The *sophia* of God was conceived in eternity past and, in the context of Paul's argument, consisted specifically of God sending his own Son in the form of a man to die a propitiatory death – the ultimate demonstration of God's love in the form of self-sacrifice versus the self-glorification and self-promotion that is a product of cosmic "wisdom."
- This *sophia* confounds fallen man because fallen man's "natural" bent is toward self-glorification and promotion and simply mirrors the attitude of the originator of the desire for independence and self-glorification, i.e. Satan (Isa 14:12-15; Ezek 28:12b-19).²

12 "How you have fallen from heaven,
 O star of the morning, son of the dawn!
 You have been cut down to the earth,
 You who have weakened the nations!
 13 "But you said in your heart,
 'I will ascend to heaven;
 I will raise my throne above the stars of God,
 And I will sit on the mount of assembly
 In the recesses of the north.
 14 'I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
 I will make myself like the Most High.'
 15 "Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol,
 To the recesses of the pit. (Isa 14:12-15)

12 "Son of man, take up a lamentation over the king of Tyre and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord GOD,
 "You had the seal of perfection,
 Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
 13 "You were in Eden, the garden of God;
 Every precious stone was your covering:
 The ruby, the topaz and the diamond;
 The beryl, the onyx and the jasper;
 The lapis lazuli, the turquoise and the emerald;
 And the gold, the workmanship of your settings and sockets,
 Was in you.
 On the day that you were created
 They were prepared.
 14 "You were the anointed cherub who covers,
 And I placed you there
 You were on the holy mountain of God;
 You walked in the midst of the stones of fire.
 15 "You were blameless in your ways
 From the day you were created
 Until unrighteousness was found in you.
 16 "By the abundance of your trade
 You were internally filled with violence,
 And you sinned;
 Therefore I have cast you as profane
 From the mountain of God.

² For a more extended analysis of these passages, please see the special entitled "The Appeal Trial of Satan: The Biblical Basis for a Philosophy of Human History." These passages are each set in a context in which Isaiah and Ezekiel are denouncing one of their enemies, thus the enemy of God Himself. The arrogance of the king of Babylon (the subject of Isaiah's denouncement) and the arrogance of the king of Tyre (Ezekiel's denouncement) can be compared to nothing greater than the arrogance of Satan when he expressed his desires to usurp God Himself as the object of worship of all of creation.

And I have destroyed you, O covering cherub,
 From the midst of the stones of fire.
 17 "Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty;
 You corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor
 I cast you to the ground;
 I put you before kings,
 That they may see you.
 18"By the multitude of your iniquities,
 In the unrighteousness of your trade
 You profaned your sanctuaries.
 Therefore I have brought fire from the midst of you;
 It has consumed you,
 And I have turned you to ashes on the earth
 In the eyes of all who see you.
 19"All who know you among the peoples
 Are appalled at you;
 You have become terrified
 And you will cease to be forever." (Ezek 28:12-19)

- Finally, this *sophia* to which Paul refers that could only be fully comprehended by the “mature” had been a “mystery,” not only because it had been in the mind of God in eternity past, but because it was part of a larger body of dispensational Truth (cf. Eph 3:2-12).³
 - Paul highlights the fact that had the powerful (and perceived to be wise) of this world truly understood the *sophia* of God, they would not have crucified Jesus Christ and by so doing sealed their own doom.
 - God’s ways and methods are indeed higher than man’s ways and methods and Paul quotes from Isaiah 64:4 and 65:17 to emphasize his point.
- Contrast between the “Spirit” of God and the “spirit” of the world (2:10b-13):
- In these verses, Paul contrasts the “Spirit” of God (i.e. the Holy Spirit) with the “spirit” of the world.
 - It is through the ministry of the Holy Spirit that any man (even the unbeliever) assimilates and internalizes the “things of God.” (The ministry of the Holy Spirit to an unbeliever is one in which the unbeliever is convinced of the Truth being taught).
 - Paul does not mean that an unbeliever cannot read and understand the words of Scripture.
 - Paul is referring to the combination of understanding Truth with faith or trust in what one has understood.
 - For the unbeliever, the Holy Spirit illumines the Truth that is understood so that faith can respond appropriately to God’s gift of His Son and so that salvation and eternal life is appropriated.
 - When Paul uses the phrase “*the spirit of the world*” in verse 12, it should be understood as a parallel to the human *sophia* possessed by the powers of this world (cf. 2:6-9, 13).

³ Certainly, we understand that the sacrificial death of the Messiah had been prophesied extensively in Hebrew Scripture, so that fact should not have been a “mystery” to the astute; however, I believe that Paul’s use of the term “mystery” in such a way that embraces, but extends beyond, the sacrificial death of Jesus as the Messiah is an allusion to, among other things, the greater, dispensational context of Jesus’ sacrificial death. Therefore, Paul’s use of the term “mystery” in relation to Christ’s sacrificial death contrasts with those who did not grasp the *sophia* of it (e.g. the opposition from the Judaizers – those unbelieving Jews who failed to grasp the significance of the change in dispensation). In our passage, the Corinthian believers faced their own version of failing to perceive the practical implications of Truth, thus they were guilty of the same error of spiritual blindness common to the “natural” man.

- Paul is not teaching that unbelievers have a human “spirit” in this passage; rather, he is indicating that unbelievers possess “wisdom” that is of this world.
 - Believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13; Rom 8:9).
 - The Holy Spirit works in the yielded believer to “combine spiritual thoughts” with “spiritual words” – a reference to the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life whereby spiritual vocabulary and spiritual categories of Truth are combined to produce spiritual wisdom that is not of this world and cannot be comprehended by this world.
- Contrast between the “natural” and “spiritual” man (2:14-16)
- In these verses, Paul contrasts the “natural” (Gr. *psuchikos* – ψυχικος) man with he who is “spiritual” (Gr. *pneumatikos* – πνευματικος).
 - By implication in this passage and by direct statement in other passages (e.g. 1 Cor 3:1-4; Eph 3:17-32), it is clear that Paul teaches that the believer can think and act like an unbeliever.
 - When a believer is thinking like a “spiritual” man, then he or she can accurately “compare” and “evaluate” (Gr. *sugkrino* – συγκρινω) things in life to objective Truth in the soul and wisely discern.
 - The “natural” man has no such capability and is in no position to evaluate the “spiritual” man.

Paul interjects a summary thought in verse 16 that is a quotation from Isaiah 40:13. His purpose in doing so is to remind the believers in Corinth of what should be true of them.

16 For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor 2:16)

Humility (teachability) is a characteristic of the spiritual man; whereas, arrogance is a characteristic of the natural man. The “natural” man has not internalized the mind of the Lord Jesus Christ whereas the spiritual man has internalized the mind of Christ.