

The Church of the Servant King

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

(SB_1Cor_Introduction)

1 Corinthians 3

In our study of chapter 2, we observed that Paul introduced a number of concepts that he has not previously addressed. The concepts that Paul introduced make it absolutely clear that believers can live and think like an unbeliever. Paul draws distinctions between the “fleshly” or “carnal” and the “spiritual” in regards to believers. Here is a brief recap of some of the terminology and phrases that Paul introduced in chapter 2.

Chapter / Verse	Term or Phrase	Comments
“Wisdom”		
2:1	“I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom ...”	The Greek word translated “wisdom” in all of these verses is <i>sophia</i> (Gr. σοφία). As we observed in the prior session, 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 theory or the knowledge of Truth into one’s practical life circumstances. ¹
2:4	“...my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom ...”	
2:5	“...so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men...”	
2:6	“...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...”	
2:7-8	“...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...”	
2:13	“...which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom ...”	Paul’s distinction – In this passage, it is fairly obvious that Paul makes a distinction between two sources or foundations for such “wisdom.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Wisdom of this age, a wisdom of men ➢ Wisdom possessed by those who are mature <p>These are two competing systems of wisdom – one based upon the order of the cosmos (i.e. Satan’s kingdom or domain and its order) and the other based upon God’s order.</p> <p>The specific issue that is being addressed in the context of Paul’s argument is how these two competing systems of wisdom actualize the death of Christ, i.e. how do they view it and then incorporate it into their daily practice.</p> <p>The <i>sophia</i> 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.”</p> <p>This <i>sophia</i> 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).</p>

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.

“Mature”		
2:6	“Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature... ”	<p>Only the “mature” (Gr. <i>teleios</i> – τελειος) have embraced <i>sophia</i> that is of God versus of the world. <i>Teleios</i> means “complete” or “fulfillment.”² In other words, Paul is saying that the “mature” believer is one who is characterized as having internalized the “wisdom” of God and views life circumstances from that perspective.</p> <p>The “mature” believer has embraced the objective realities of God’s purposes, has internalized those realities and interprets life circumstances through a lens of objectivity.</p> <p>Conversely, the immature believer does not possess such a “complete” perspective and still views life circumstances through a lens of subjectivity.</p>
“Natural man” & “Spiritual”		
2:14-15	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.	<p>In these verses, Paul contrasts the “natural” (Gr. <i>psuchikos</i> – ψυχικος) man with he who is “spiritual” (Gr. <i>pneumatikos</i> – πνευματικος).</p> <p>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.</p> <p>When a believer is thinking like a “spiritual” man, then he or she can accurately “compare” and “evaluate” (Gr. <i>sugkrino</i> – συγκρινω) things in life to objective Truth in the soul and wisely discern.</p> <p>The “natural” man has no such capability and is in no position to evaluate the “spiritual” man.</p>
“Spirit of God” & “things of God” & “spirit of the world” & “combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words”		
2:10b-13	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. ”	<p>In these verses, Paul clearly indicates the dichotomous set of views available to the believer. The following observations are drawn from Paul’s logic in these verses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ When Paul uses the phrase “<i>the spirit of the world</i>” in verse 12, it should be understood as a parallel to the human <i>sophia</i> possessed by the powers of this world (cf. 2:6-9, 13). ➤ “Spiritual thoughts” could be defined as categorical Truth (doctrine) which provides the believer with a divine viewpoint basis for conceptualizing solutions to life situations. ➤ “Spiritual words” could be defined as vocabulary that is used to express divine viewpoint to others. ➤ The Holy Spirit teaches the believer and serves as a tutor Who illuminates the Truth that the believer has embraced in faith so that application can be made to life situations. ➤ The “mature” or “spiritual” believer has a complete divine viewpoint perspective and is yielding to that viewpoint as life circumstances are addressed. ➤ The “natural” man is one who is addressing life circumstances from a human viewpoint perspective that characterizes the fallen world under the

² Ibid.

		<p>dominion of Satan.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ This is a viewpoint that is subjective – i.e. focused upon self-promotion, self-preservation, and self-glorification. ➤ The “natural” man possessed a view of the Messiah and His kingdom based upon a perspective that when it is established, it would simply validate the righteousness standing that they thought they already possessed. ➤ The Corinthian believers had succumbed to a derivative of this self-righteousness – sectarianism. ➤ As a result, even though they were believers, they were thinking and living like “natural” men – not “spiritual” men.
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SECTARIANISM IS SYMPTOMATIC OF CARNALITY (3:1-4)

1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. 2 I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, 3 for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? 4 For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men?

Paul builds upon the logic presented in chapter 2. Paul takes the Corinthian believers to task for having only assimilated the most basic elements of the Christian faith and life. Paul had taught them justification by faith alone – a truth that especially resonated with them as Gentiles. Paul did not try to demonstrate profound wisdom to them in consideration of the influence of their Greek cultural setting – a setting that would have caused them to place a premium upon wise oratory and logic, yet which would have made his presentations a performance subject to debate – a competition between human abilities. Paul simply preached a simple, but profound message – a message that demonstrated the power of God, not man (2:1-5).

Even though the Corinthians were believers, they were immature. They were not “complete” or “mature.” They had not internalized the Truth and they were not actualizing Truth into their decisions. Since they had not assimilated the basics, the Holy Spirit could not minister in their lives to illuminate them as to the proper combination of “spiritual thoughts” (categorical Truth or doctrine which provides the believer with a divine viewpoint basis for conceptualizing solutions to life situations) with “spiritual words” (vocabulary that is used to express divine viewpoint to others).

The basic theological point of tension between Paul and the Corinthians in this epistle was over what it means to be *pneumatikos*, a Spirit person. Because of their experience of *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues) they considered themselves to be “as the angels” and in need only of shedding their bodies. The sources of this distorted view were popular philosophy tainted with Hellenistic dualism. The result was a “spirituality” and “higher wisdom” that had little connection with ethical behavior.³

The concern from here on will be to force them to acknowledge the folly of their “wisdom,” which is expressing itself in quarrels and thereby

³ Thomas Constable, “Notes on 1 Corinthians,” www.soniclight.com. Hellenistic dualism viewed anything material as evil and anything non-material or “spiritual” as good. It has similarities with Gnosticism which grew in prominence later during the 2nd Century A.D.

destroying the very church for which Christ died.⁴

Some have made a distinction between the “natural” man and the “fleshly” or “carnal” man. For instance, Dr. Stanley D. Toussaint indicates that Paul presents four categories of men in this passage: 1) the “natural” man (which Toussaint defines as the unbeliever); 2) the “spiritual” man (which Toussaint defines as the “mature” believer); 3) the “infant” or “immature” Christian (which Toussaint associates with Paul’s reference to the “carnal” or “fleshly” believer); and 4) the “carnal” Christian (which Toussaint distinguishes as the believer who willfully lives like the natural man, thus does not mature).⁵

Others, e.g. Lewis S. Chafer, saw only three types of men in this passage: the natural man, the carnal man and the spiritual man.⁶

A More Complete View of Paul’s Teaching – “Spiritual” vs. “Carnal”

I think the simplest categorization that is consistent with Paul’s argument is to understand that in this particular passage, Paul seems to equate the “spiritual” believer with the believer who is “mature.” When we combine Paul’s teaching in this passage with his teaching on the subject elsewhere (e.g. Rom 6:1-14; 12:1-3), the picture that emerges of the “spiritual” believer is one who possesses the appropriate Truth that has been accepted and internalized (i.e. “know” and “reckon” in the KJV of Romans 6:6 & 11) and to which the believer is yielding (Rom 6:13).

On the contrary, the “carnal” believer is one who is making decisions in response to life situations based upon old man (i.e. fleshly) thinking (cf. Eph 4:17-24). This believer is thinking and responding to life situations no differently than the unbeliever.

So, in summary, it is the body of thought and viewpoint which a believer applies (or yields) when faced with life situations that determines whether that believer’s status is spiritual or carnal. A believer can be sincere, yet not mature in faith (doctrine or Truth internalized). A sincere believer who does not have the appropriate Truth for a given life situation will have two options: 1) apply “fleshly” or “carnal” or “human viewpoint” logic; or 2) seek immediate counsel from a mature believer with the appropriate Truth (thus live out of someone else’s soul).

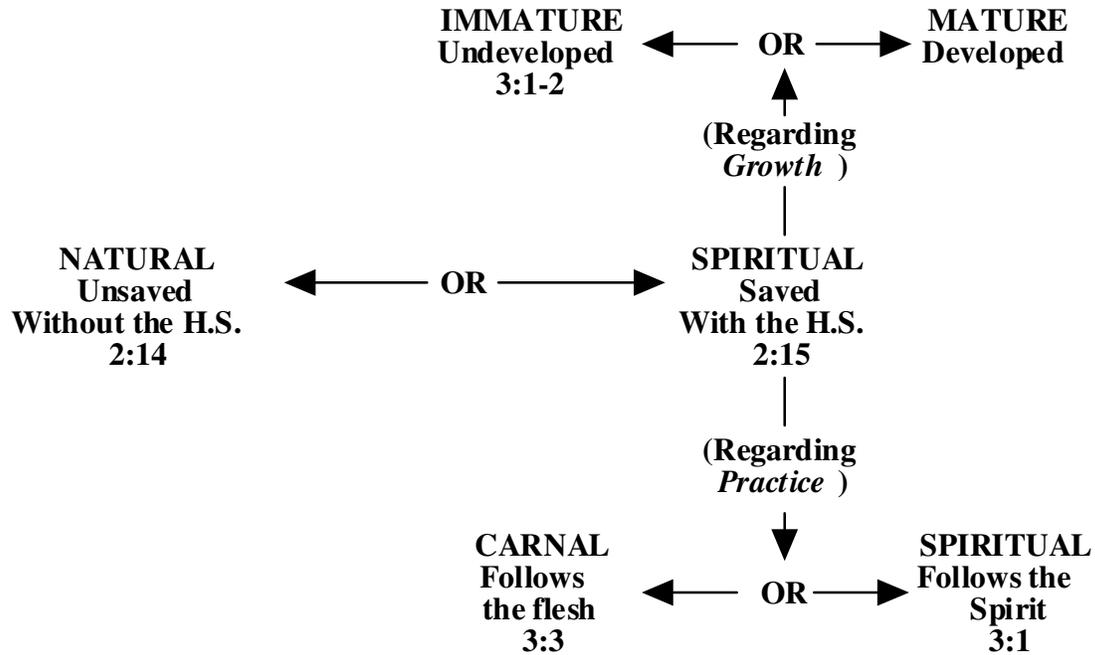
Finally, there is a positional (vs. experiential) dimension to Paul’s logic in chapter 2 and 3. The focus of my comments to this point have centered upon the experiential (i.e. Phase 2), not the positional (i.e. Phase 1) dimension. A comparison of the different dimensions in Paul’s logic is nicely presented in the following diagram.⁷

⁴ Ibid. Their sectarianism was just a manifestation of self-righteousness.

⁵ Stanley D. Toussaint, “The Spiritual Man,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125:498 (April-June 1968):139-46,

⁶ Lewis S. Chafer, *He That is Spiritual* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1918, 1967), 3-14.

⁷ Constable, “Notes on 1 Corinthians.”



BUILDING UPON THE FOUNDATION OF JESUS CHRIST (3:5-17)

5 What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. 7 So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. 8 Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. 10 According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. 11 For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. 14 If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. 15 If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. 16 Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? 17 If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

The usual explanation of this passage is that it describes the building of an individual Christian life. In other words, all believers have a foundation of Christ, but some make decisions that are of a quality that will be rewarded in eternity and others will be burned up at the bema seat judgment. While this may be a valid *application* of this passage, it is not the basic *interpretation*. In context, Paul is discussing the building of the local church, which he refers to here as the temple of God. To help the Corinthians abandon the party spirit that marked their church, Paul stressed the equality of their teachers as fellow workers *under* God's sovereign authority (vv. 5-9).

The reality that believers will one day stand at the bema seat judgment to be evaluated for the purpose of rewards is taught in many passages, e.g. 1 Cor. 1:8; 2 Cor. 5:10; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2 Tim. 1:12, 18; 4:8). If the servant of the Lord has made a lasting contribution to the building of the church by emphasizing the gospel, he or she will receive a reward. If someone has not because he or she has pursued human "wisdom," that person will not, though he or she will retain his or her salvation.

"It is unfortunately possible for people to attempt to build the church out of every imaginable human system predicated on merely worldly wisdom, be it philosophy, 'pop' psychology, managerial techniques, relational 'good feelings,' or what have you. But at the final judgment, all such building (and perhaps countless other forms, where systems have become more important than the gospel itself) will be shown for what it is: something merely human, with no character of Christ or his gospel in it."⁸

Note that it is our labor that will be the basis of our reward, not the fruit of our labor. These rewards are referenced as crowns elsewhere (e.g. 1 Cor 9:25; Phil 4:1; 1 Thess 2:19; 2 Tim 4:8; Jas 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4).

The Corinthian church was a temple that God's Spirit indwelt. Paul was not speaking here of individual believers being temples of God, though we are (cf. 1 Cor 6:19), nor of the church universal as the temple of God, though it is (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5). He meant the collective body of believers that make up the local church as is clear from his use of the plural "you" in the Greek text and the singular for "temple." The local congregation was not just any building (v. 9) but a sanctuary (Gr. *naos*) that God inhabited. The presence of the Spirit alone marked them off as God's sanctuary in Corinth.

If any servant of the Lord tears down the church instead of building it up, God will tear him or her down (Acts 9:1-4). He usually does this by sending temporal discipline in one form or another (cf. 5:5). The Greek word translated "destroys" (*phtheiro*) also means "defiles."

Defilement within a local body of believers occurs when such things as sectarianism practiced by the Corinthians is allowed to continue. The promoters of such things are accruing "wood, hay, and stubble" which will be consumed.

AVOID WORLDLY WISDOM (3:18-23)

18 Let no man deceive himself If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God For it is written, "He is THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS"; 20 and again, "THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS of the wise, THAT THEY ARE USELESS." 21 So then let no one boast in men For all things belong to you, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, 23 and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.

Paul used Old Testament quotations to give added authority to his thought and he referenced Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11. The best wisdom the natural man can produce is foolishness compared with the wisdom God has revealed in His Word.

Unbelievers cannot avoid God's judgment through rationalism and self-justification. The reasoning of the wise of this world is useless regarding the most important issues of life.

⁸ Constable.

Paul opened this chain of logic in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 by stating that the wisdom of God, namely, Christ crucified, is foolishness to the world. Here makes the same point using reverse logic: the wisdom of the world is foolishness in God's sight.

All of God's servants (Paul, Apollos, Peter) were God's gifts to these believers. When Paul indicates that all things belong to these believers, he means that the world belongs to the Christian in the sense that we will inherit it and reign over it with Christ during His reign in the millennial kingdom.

All the Corinthians belonged to Christ, not just those of the "Christ party" (1:12). The basis of their unity as believers is founded in their faith in Christ. They belonged to Him, not to one of His servants. Even Christ belongs to God in the sense of being under the authority and protection of the Father (cf. 8:6; 11:3; 15:28). This is functional rather than ontological subordination.

Paul made several references to the administrative order of God when correcting disorders of various kinds in the Corinthian church. This order is the Father over the Son, the Son over the man, and the man over the woman (e.g., 8:6; 11:3; et al.). The apostle stressed divine order because the Corinthians were disorderly having failed to yield to the Holy Spirit's ministry.