

Corinthian Confusion
1 Corinthians 1:1 – 2:16
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Happy New Year! I hope your holiday vacation was as special as mine was! I loved spending time with my family! But I'm very glad to be back with all of you today/tonight! Today we began our study of Paul's letters to the Corinthians. Commentators tell us that Paul actually wrote four letters to the Corinthians, two of which have been lost. The ones we know as first and second Corinthians are actually letters number two and four. Even without the two lost letters, first and second Corinthians together are Paul's longest epistles, written with the goal of keeping the church out of trouble until they grew up, and giving them the tools they needed to run their lives without him. It was a difficult task; after all, the Corinthians had been rescued out of pagan culture, but were still immersed in it, much like the churches in our culture today, which is why Paul's letters to the Corinthians are still relevant after almost two thousand years.

Let's begin with a little background information about this ancient city.

Corinth was located just off of the isthmus of ancient Greece, also known as Macedonia. It served as a center of commerce because small boats were often ported, or carried in wagons, across the isthmus of Corinth, rather than travel around it for two or three days. Because it saw so many merchants and sailors from both the Aegean and Adriatic

seas, it became a dominant commercial center, and was a prime location for trade as well as a center for Greek culture and religion. At the time Paul arrived it was a Roman colony.

It contained 12 temples to various gods and was known as a city of immorality, especially because of the many temple prostitutes. Its name became a proverb for loose living. To “Corinthianize” meant to be promiscuous in one's life style. And to this city, Paul traveled on his second missionary journey, bringing to them the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We read about his visit in Acts 18. After spending some time in Athens alone, Paul traveled to Corinth to preach. He met and began a wonderful friendship with a couple of tent-making Jews from Rome, Aquila and Priscilla, his wife. He worked with them, helping to make tents during the week, and every Sabbath they worshiped together at the synagogue. As his opportunities grew, Paul could later spend his whole time talking and meeting with the Jews and Greeks who would listen about the Gospel of Christ.

Paul finally had to leave the synagogue, because some Jews opposed him and rejected his message of Christ as the crucified Messiah and risen Savior. You remember, this opposition finally started a riot, when the Jews brought Paul before the Roman proconsul, Gallio. Their charges were, “This man is persuading the people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law.” [Acts 18:13] But Gallio saw this accusation as pure Jewish pettiness, and refused to hear them.

Things turned ugly, when the pro-Paul crowd turned on the anti-Paul crowd, grabbing their synagogue leader, Sosthenes, and beating him right in front of Gallio. Acts 18 informed us that Paul had stayed in Corinth for about a year and a half (Acts 18:11). Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria . . .” [Acts 18:18a] landing in Ephesus. It was from Ephesus that Paul was believed to have written the letter we know as 1 Corinthians back to the believers in Corinth.

Apparently Paul had received news that things were falling apart in his absence. First came information from the friends of Chloe, whose house church had some personality problems among the leadership. Then came the news that a member of the church was having an affair with his stepmother. Paul apparently fired off the first lost letter telling the Corinthians not to associate with sexually immoral people. Then came a letter from the Corinthians with questions regarding worship, food, marriage and divorce, dress codes for women, and observance of the Lord’s Supper, spiritual gifts, all of which needed clarification.

The church needed leadership, but Paul felt he was needed in Ephesus, so with the help of his disciple, Sosthenes, he dictated the long letter we begin studying this week. How could it be that this former antagonist, Sosthenes, had now become a traveling companion with Paul?

I believe Paul took Sosthenes into his care after that beating, to help him while he healed and to show him that believers in Christ Jesus loved their enemies. So, in this short time, his enemy, the leader against

him from the synagogue, became his brother and perhaps even a scribe to write down Paul's dictation for this letter to the Corinthians.

As we studied 1 Corinthians, chapters 1 and 2, we noticed that there was confusion and dissension going on among the believers. They were experiencing divisions; exhibiting foolishness; and excluding the Spirit. Yet Paul began his letter to them with encouragement of their position as believers.

The greeting, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” is used in some variation in all of Paul’s letters. Grace is God’s acceptance of us; it’s how we have attained salvation, why we are called the children of God, and why we are heirs to the Kingdom, why we have unity among believers. Peace is my acceptance of me, inadequate as I am, totally unworthy of the many blessings bestowed on me, but pleasing to God in my present state, and though unworthy, I am of great worth. Unless we embrace that reality, we will not be at peace in any area of our lives. Grace and peace are two of the greatest gifts from God, and that is what Paul wanted for all of his readers to know then and now.

Paul continued: “I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way – with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge....Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.” [1 Corinthians 1:4, 5, 7]

The foundation of faith given by God's grace was firm. It had been confirmed by the gifts of the Spirit, and the Corinthian believers were equipped with knowledge and the ability to speak and discuss together about the gospel, taught by Jesus Christ through Paul. Their salvation was sure, and they would be kept by the Spirit until the return of Christ Jesus.

In our memory verse, Paul confirmed the connection each believer had. “God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.” [1 Corinthians 1:9] God had called each one into a fellowship with his Son. All believers should be gathered together in Him, not into separated groups. But such divisions, or “parties”, had begun to divide them because of their preferences for visiting, gifted speakers.

Verse 12 explained further about these divisions: “What I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul', another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.'” [1 Corinthians 1:12] They had been blessed with many notable preachers, and had learned a great deal from each one. But rather than share together all they had learned, to encourage the growth of the church together, they began to divide up because of their preferences.

Some were loyal to Paul and only wanted to discuss his teachings. Still others preferred the polished Greek rhetorical style of Apollos. Others had really enjoyed hearing all that Cephas, or Peter had taught

them. The fourth group thrived on hearing the stories of Christ from those who had walked with Him and been eyewitnesses of his life and miracles.

All of these speakers had valuable insight into the gospel. They contributed to the rich knowledge that had led each believer to salvation in Christ. But the schisms and divisions into “parties” was wrong and harmful to the church. In verse 10 Paul plead for unity: “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.” [1 Corinthians 1:10]

Then Paul paints for them a poignant picture in verse 13. “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Christ in his teaching drew Jews and Gentiles to himself, united in love for Him. He didn't die just for the Jews or just the rich, but it was very clear that He died for the entire world. His salvation brought unity to all who believed. Peter could testify about His teaching and prayers for the unity of His disciples.

Just before Jesus was arrested, Peter witnessed the unity Jesus taught in His prayer for His disciples: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.

May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” [John 17:20,21]

The divisions the believers in Corinth were creating were not just divisions among themselves, but they were endangering the spread of the message that Christ was sent by the Father to save all the world. Their schisms would confuse new believers by demanding they take sides, rather than concentrating on Christ crucified. So the message of salvation would be lost in their posturing.

They were even using their baptisms to divide the church. If Apollos “knew only the baptism of John” [Acts 18:25] when he preached about Jesus in Corinth, he probably officiated over many believer's baptisms. Paul had baptized a few converts and perhaps Peter had also baptized those who believed under his preaching tour.

But again, baptism should be unifying for all believers, rather than divisive. When we are baptized, we are announcing our belief in the death and resurrection of Christ. We are baptized in “the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” and promising we will live from that moment forward as “new creatures” in Christ. Jesus commanded that anyone who believes in Him should be baptized.

Out of obedience to that command, I was baptized when I was nine years old. Some of you were baptized as adults. I challenge any of you who have not yet been baptized for your faith, please let your discussion leader know, and we can direct you how to join in an opportunity to do

so soon. But all of us who are baptized, were baptized in the name of Christ Jesus, not in the name of the person who dunked us!

Our baptism unites us together in faith, and should never be used as a point of separation, just as our preferences of learning styles should never divide us. Although many of us prefer a systematic approach to Bible study, some prefer lively debate. Some of us might really enjoy art and illustrations to enhance our understanding, while others prefer listening to the Scriptures read from audio recordings. But no matter how we prefer to learn, we have a unity in the message of the cross.

Now if you or I were the ones to decide the best way to spread this message, what would you have chosen? I might have gone with the angel's announcement, but magnified across the sky and shouted to everyone on earth at once, not to just a few simple shepherds or fishermen. Perhaps we might have decided to place the witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection in a forum of the world's greatest orators and convince all of them at once and then send them out to the distant points of civilization, so that they might convince everyone to come to repentance and salvation. Wouldn't that be a smart way to do it?

But God chose this means of spreading the “good news,” that of having each believer go and tell others, one on one. Why would God trust simple, ordinary, “foolish” people to spread his message? Because He decided, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of

the intelligent I will frustrate.' Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" [1 Corinthians 1:19-20]

The greatest "wisdom" of this world cannot penetrate a person's heart. The wisest people on earth are often caught up in their own intellect and refuse to recognize God's wisdom. So God chose this very foolish plan, from man's point of view; which is the personal testimony of simple, flawed people, to plant His seed of faith. In verses 22 & 23 Paul said, "Jews demand signs and the Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." [1 Corinthians 1:22-23] Why was the idea of the crucified Christ a cause of the Jews stumbling? The crucifixion brought together two elements of the Jewish faith that were in opposition. One was that of the shame of hanging on a pole and the second was the expected glory of coming Messiah.

In the Law of Moses, God had specifically declared that it was shameful, and only a punishment for the worst crimes, to be killed by hanging on a pole. "If someone guilty of a capital offense is put to death and their body is exposed on a pole, you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance." [Deuteronomy 21:22-23]

Conquering heathen nations would display the bodies or heads of their defeated enemies on poles to demoralize and disgust them. God said to leave them displayed like that would curse the land. Roman soldiers used death by crucifixion for these same reasons. Seeing “criminals” displayed naked on crosses outside of their cities would absolutely disgust passers-by and deter similar crimes. So, when Jesus was crucified in this way, it was shameful and absolutely disgusting.

The modern concept of wearing a cross as a piece of jewelry or an object of honor in one's home would be completely unheard of! The cross was feared and revolting. Yet this is the death the Father allowed for his Son, to atone for our sins. Then, Paul taught that Jesus the long-awaited Messiah had come, but had died on a cross? Unheard of! Unimaginable to a Jew! This was why it was a stumbling block for the Jews.

But it was also considered foolishness to the Greeks. Remember, most Greeks had grown up hearing about the heroic deeds of the gods and how men might go through tremendous trials to accomplish feats so that they might gain their favor. Their heroes might go through suffering to overcome, but not their gods. Now to hear that God's Son, Jesus, came to earth as a baby, lived a simple life, and accomplished signs and amazing miracles for the Jews – only to be crucified and die? This seemed like foolishness to the Greeks.

The gods might require men to strive for their favors, but not for his own Son to do so. Surely God's Son would never die for lowly people. It's foolish to think that men could even kill a god! It's foolish to think that – even if that was true, and Jesus did die and come alive again, then surely people would be required to do heroic deeds to gain the benefits of this redemption. But Paul preached that only faith in Him would give us forgiveness and salvation. That just didn't compute! That was just plainly foolish.

However, Paul's text says just the opposite! “But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” [1 Corinthians 1:24, 25]

Lets see how Paul compares the wisdom of the world with what men consider the foolishness of God:

- v. 18 The cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.
- v. 19 God will destroy the wisdom of the wise.
- v. 20 God made foolish the wisdom of the world.
- v. 21 The world in its wisdom didn't know God.
- v. 25 The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.
- v. 30 Christ Jesus has become for us wisdom from God.

And why did God choose to use such an extraordinary display of His wisdom before people? “But God chose the foolish things of the

world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.” [1 Corinthians 1:27-29]

God's ways are so much higher than our logic or wisdom might expect! He used the ugliest punishment men had devised to provide the atonement for our sins. He offered salvation through the death of his Son. He provided forgiveness to sinful people. And because Jesus rose again, He offers everlasting life to those who are doomed to die! If that is foolishness, I am so glad He chose that method to save me!

Although Paul had the education to present slick, philosophical presentations, he purposely decided to use a method of simplicity when he came to share the gospel with the Corinthians. Prior to his visit to Corinth, Paul had preached in Athens. Acts 17, beginning in verse 16, records how Paul awed the elite philosophers in Athens with a well thought out speech to present and introduce them to “the unknown God.”

But he chose not to rest on his own wisdom and expertise when he spoke for a good reason. “I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.” [1 Corinthians 2:3-5]

And with these words, Paul then turned from this exhibition of their foolishness to explaining how the Corinthian divisions were excluding the power of the Holy Spirit. In verse 7 of chapter 2 Paul explained, “No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.”

To turn the Corinthian believers away from their differences and back to the unity God wanted for them, Paul revealed that God had given the means to understand this mystery by saying, “. . . these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.” [1 Corinthians 2:10] It is no wonder that believers get so easily side tracked by fancy rhetoric and slick logic.

Immaturity in our spiritual lives makes it very difficult to understand the depths of God's actions toward us. We are so easily lost in our own shallow thoughts, that we keep ourselves from relying on God's Spirit to really learn what He desires to teach us. Paul challenged his confused readers to seek to understand God's message through God's Spirit.

“This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the

Spirit. The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for 'Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ." [1 Corinthians 2:13-16]

These final words from chapter 2 explain Paul's main point for this introduction to his letter to the Corinthians. Stop seeking stimulation from the fancy teaching of your favorite preachers. This only shows your immaturity because you are excluding the Spirit from your thinking. God wants to show you so much more of His wisdom, but you will not find it in your own intellect.

God has given us his Holy Spirit to teach and reveal His amazing love and life in you. These things are understood by His Spirit. That is His purpose for living inside you! He wants to teach you and expand your thinking so you begin to use the wisdom of God's Word in judgments and decisions you make.

Paul will be going on in this letter of 1 Corinthians to chastise, rebuke and instruct this infant church in Corinth, but first he reminded them of who they were before Christ and who they are now in Christ.

"We have the mind of Christ," he said. Do we use Christ's mind in our daily lives? Isn't it much easier to think things through using the accepted wisdom around us? The world tells us to treat ourselves to what we want. We deserve to be happy and if we don't take care of ourselves first, how can we take care of others?

But the Spirit of Christ teaches us to put others before ourselves. We shouldn't listen to our own selfish desires when they tell us to exclude helping those in need around us. We mustn't let our own wisdom, opinions and preferences divide us in the church. Let's listen to the mind of Christ given through his Spirit living inside us. He will teach us everything we need to know to live our lives for God.

And as we live for Him, His wisdom spreads to those around us. It may not make sense to them, at first. But God's ways are so much greater than our ways. Even the little we exhibit Jesus in our lives, He will use to draw others to salvation. Then, as we live for Him together, in the unity of His Spirit, the lives we touch in this year of 2020 will be changed; they will turn from the foolishness of this world to the wisdom of God.