

# **NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY**

## *Lesson 40*

### **I Corinthians – Part One**

#### **The Wisdom of God and The Divisions in the Church**

#### **Chapters 1-3**

## **I. BACKGROUND**

We already took a broad view of the Corinthian letter. Our first class focused on what we know about the city of Corinth as well as the biblical background that gives us additional details for understanding the “occasion” of the letter (theology term for the “reasons for writing”). Then, we plugged that knowledge into a complete review of the letter as a whole. We will now examine the various parts of the letter in more detail. As already set forward, Paul writes I Corinthians as a follow-up to a prior letter Paul wrote the church. The church wrote Paul a letter which prompts this response we call First Corinthians.

Additionally, we should remember from the last class that Paul received personal messages about the state of affairs in the Corinthians church from several different people who had recently been in Corinth. Paul writes to address the problems of which he has heard, as well as to answer questions and concerns of the Corinthians.

A substantial part of I Corinthians has Paul defending himself and, even more so, his message. If we had the benefit of the earlier letters between Paul and the church and the news reports brought to Paul about the church, then we could more easily understand the purpose behind much of what Paul wrote. Without those benefits, however, we can still glean a great deal with a good reading of the letter. So, as we look at the first three chapters more carefully, we will hear echoes of words Paul heard about the church, either from personal reports or from an earlier letter.

## **II. WISDOM OF GOD AND CHURCH DIVISIONS**

In the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses the issue of divisions in the church. In the midst of this discussion, Paul weaves in core teaching about the wisdom of God. Those issues go together for Paul because it seems that a mis-appreciation of Paul’s teaching (and in fact, a mis-appreciation of the wisdom of God) is core to the issues that divide the church.

In 1:10-17, Paul sets out the problem of divisions. Paul appeals for a united church, both in mind and thought. Paul is not talking about divisions based on multiple locations of church meetings. Paul is concerned that the church is split on teaching and authority.

Paul gets this news mainly from Chloe's household. Paul readily identifies his sources for the quarrels among the church members (as opposed to saying "anonymous sources tell me ...").

The church was dividing herself with statements of whose teaching they mostly identify with and follow. Some say, "I am of Paul." Others cite Peter (Cephas), Apollos, and even Christ. Paul addresses this division by putting Jesus as the one to follow, not a human. Paul forces the issue, noting that he, Paul, was not crucified for any of them. Paul actually baptized very few of them himself.

Paul's purpose was never to get a Pauline following, but solely to preach to people the good news ("gospel") that the cross of Christ brought the power of forgiveness and eternal life. Even Paul's preaching this good news should not establish a Pauline cult following because Paul never preached it from human wisdom. If it was Paul's wise and skillful preaching that was the key in the salvation of the Corinthians, then by definition, the power of the cross itself was diluted. No. The power that saved the Corinthians was the power of the cross, and the cross alone.

From 1:17 through 2:16, Paul pauses his direct assault on the division issue to explain more fully the wisdom of the gospel. We should remember here that when Paul speaks of the "gospel," he does not mean the books we call the "gospels" (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John); nor, does Paul mean the life of Christ in general as documented in those books. Paul uses the word "gospel" to reference the fact that Jesus Christ was crucified, died, and resurrected on our account so that we could have forgiveness of sins and a rebirth into his holiness by our trusting in that sacrifice.

This message of the cross Paul says is "foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God" (1:18). Although Paul is speaking to Christians, Paul is emphasizing the wisdom of God's salvation event over the foolish perception of that event by the unsaved because those dividing the church were missing the import of the message that built the church.

Evidently, the Corinthian division was not just between which “teachers” the various factions followed, but also the caliber of the actual teaching itself. A few people must have considered some teaching as filled with greater wisdom than other teaching. In verses 20 through 25, Paul probes for those who used this measuring stick, calling for the wise ones, the scholars, and the philosophers. Human wisdom is foolishness before God. The world does not understand God or the wisdom whereby God acts in the world. The very idea of a substituting sacrifice for human sin (the gospel itself) is contrary to the wishes and expectations of the world, both Jew and Gentile.

Paul uses a wonderful Greek word to describe the offensiveness of the cross. The word *scandalon* (σκανδαλον) was actually the trigger of a trap that was used to catch animals. When an animal unknowingly tripped the trigger, the trap was sprung and the animal captured. That is the “scandal” or “stumbling block” affecting both Jew and Gentile.

The *scandalon* was opposite of the Jewish messianic expectations. Rather than finding Messiah as crucified by the authorities, the Jews expected a triumphant and conquering messiah who would miraculously conquer the world, rather than suffer the world’s abuse. The Greeks, on the other hand, expected anyone worthy of following to be a wise, philosophical leader with some measure of world respect. In contrast, Jesus was one who had no worldly schooling and no worldly philosophy. Jesus was no Plato, Socrates or Aristotle. Jesus was a carpenter’s son from a backcountry who had a very small following and was killed by the authorities for civil unrest, if anything.

This “messiah” was a stumbling block that tripped everyone, Jew and Gentile alike. Yet, God in his wisdom used this stumbling block to bring many to their knees in obedience and trust while others miss eternal life falling on the trap and never believing.

Michael Card wrote a wonderful song setting out the truth Paul speaks of here, called “Scandalon.” The words are useful as an interpretation and application of this passage out of Corinthians:

The seers and the prophets had foretold it long ago  
That the long awaited one would make men stumble.  
But they were looking for a king to conquer and to kill.  
Who'd have ever thought He'd be so weak and humble?

He will be the truth that will offend them one and all.  
A stone that makes men stumble.  
And a rock that makes them fall.  
Many will be broken so that He can make them whole.  
And many will be crushed and lose their own soul.

Along the path of life there lies a stubborn Scandalon,  
And all who come this way must be offended.  
To some He is a barrier; to others He's the way.  
For all should know the scandal of believing.

He will be the truth that will offend them one and all.  
A stone that makes men stumble,  
And a rock that makes them fall.  
Many will be broken so that He can make them whole.  
And many will be crushed and lose their own soul.

It seems today the Scandalon offends no one at all.  
The image we present can be stepped over.  
Could it be that we are like the others long ago?  
Will we ever learn that all who come must stumble?

Card points to the hard truth that many in the church today seek to dilute – the offensiveness of the cross and its message rather than letting it have its offensive power. For Paul, it was never a matter of diluting. Paul saw this *scandalon* as God's wisdom, far wiser than any wisdom of man.

Paul directly seeks out those who questioned the strength and maturity of Paul's message, asking the Corinthians to remember life before Paul's message of conversion. The Corinthians were not a particularly wise or influential people. They were not folks of long pedigrees with nobility coursing through their veins. Yet, these are the ones that God called to be his church. God used the weak and lowly things of the world to change the world. The Corinthians themselves, though puffed now with their post-conversion "wisdom," were originally nothing worth puffing over! What made them different was the sacrifice of Christ. Jesus was their righteousness, their holiness, and their redemption. If they were to boast in anything, then it should be Jesus (1:26-31).

Paul starts our chapter 2 (remember that Paul did not add chapter divisions, the church fathers did so at a much later date) extending the impact of his previous statements regarding the strength and wisdom of the gospel

message. Paul explains that even his preaching of the message was not out of human eloquence or super wisdom. The preaching itself was simple. The presentation was with human weakness. The converting power came from the message of Christ crucified, not the messenger's delivery. The power was the act of Christ, not the preaching of Paul. The Spirit conveyed the truth of the crucifixion, so faith should never rest on the preacher, the persuasive delivery, or the wisdom of man. Faith rests on the conviction God's Spirit brought in the atonement as God's saving event for mankind (2:1-5).

That is not to say that Paul's message is itself a simple message for the spiritually immature. Instead, Paul makes the point that this simple message that seems foolish to many is actually profound. It is wisdom of the highest caliber because it is God's wisdom. God had hidden this wisdom for ages. However, God set it apart for us long ago to bring us into his glory by redeeming us in Jesus. The authorities of the time did not see God at work in Jesus, or they would have never crucified him.

The truth of what occurred on Calvary is conveyed to those who believe by nothing less than the Spirit of God. As Jesus promised in John 14–16, the Spirit came and brought conviction on the hearts of men that Jesus was God, crucified for us in loving redemption, so that we may join him in the Father's house. Because the Spirit teaches this truth, those people without the Spirit, and those people who do not listen to the Spirit, have no way of understanding the message. The message is foolishness to those people without the means to understand it, without the Spirit (2:6-16).

In Chapter three, Paul begins to tie this message back into the issue of divisions in the church. Paul explains that the people are showing a great deal of immaturity in Christ and in the message of grace when they quarrel and dispute over issues of jealousy and superiority. Indeed, how could one who truly understood that the message is only received by the Spirit and who understood that the message itself is the only cause for boasting (not the messenger or the recipient) quarrel jealously over whether they were "of Paul" or "of Apollos?" Paul and Apollos are merely vessels God used to teach his church. Paul planted the seed, Apollos watered the seed, but it was God who made the seed grow! Paul and Apollos are fellow workers with God; the Corinthians are God's field or God's building. But God is the key, not Paul or the Corinthians (3:1-9).

Paul uses this building analogy to drive home another point. Because Paul laid the foundation and others were building upon it (*i.e.*, Paul brought the converting message, but others are teaching the converted church), those

teachers in the church should be careful. Teaching that is not right before God is wasted. It is teaching that will never last or bear good fruit. It will burn up and hurt those who received it and who taught it (4:10-17). For Paul, the church was never a social club or a popularity contest. It was the saving mission of a holy and just God seeking to redeem his people for eternity and willing to pay the ultimate personal price to do so. The Corinthians should have the same mindset (as should we!).

### **III. POINTS FOR HOME**

1. Unite on Jesus.
2. See God's Wisdom at Work.
3. Fall and Let Christ Stand You Up.
4. Seek Spiritual Understanding.
5. Pray for God's Wisdom.