

October 18, 2009 1 Corinthians 1-2: Speaking Spiritual Truth

Purpose: To help us understand that Jesus Christ is the foundation of all Christian knowledge and community

Key Bible reference: 1 Corinthians 1.18-2.16

Key Verse: 1 Corinthians 2.2

Biblical Interpretation

1 Corinthians 2:1-2. Note two things that had happened before Paul wrote what we call the First Letter to the Corinthians: He tells his readers, "I wrote to you" (1 Corinthians 5:9); he also tells them, in 2:1, "I came to you." Acts 18:1-18 gives additional information about that original visit to Corinth.

In verse 2, Paul says he decided to know nothing except Jesus Christ. Consider: Is it possible to decide by sheer will power to separate yourself from knowledge you already possess? Did Paul remove from his mind what he had learned earlier, such as the "ancestral law" he had studied "at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3). Or is Paul comparing himself to persons he has known who wear their academic achievements like medals of honor?

Such boastfulness is dealt with in Corinthians 1:28-31. Paul's attitude firmly rooted in the language of the prophets and the Gospels. We read in Jeremiah 9:23-24: "Then says the LORD: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast in this, that they understand and know me, that am the LORD; I act with steadfast love justice, and righteousness ... for of these things I delight."

Take a moment to read aloud Jesus' brief prayer of thanksgiving from Matthew 11:25 (also Luke

10:21): "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants."

Paul does not pretend to be stupid or uneducated. When he says he has decided to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified, he makes known his intention to deal only with the basics as he addresses the Corinthian Christians. Other English translations shed light on the word decided. The King James Version uses "determined." The New International Version uses "resolved." The Good News Bible puts it this way: "I made up my mind."

The expression "him crucified" is unusual English. No one would say, "I read a book about Franklin D. Roosevelt and him elected." "Him crucified" seems to have a sort of preachy or pious sound. Perhaps that is why many Bible translations since the KJV have kept that wording. An exception that puts Paul's meaning into the language of common people is the Good News Bible: "Jesus Christ and especially his death on the cross." Another exception, one that paints a dramatic picture, is the New English Bible: "Jesus Christ—Christ nailed to the cross."

Verses 3-5. Paul recalls with the Corinthians that during his original visit in Corinth he did not impress people by his appearance, his

eloquence, or his philosophical arguments. It was precisely his presentation of "Christ nailed to the cross"—a scandalous message for people in the first-century Roman world—as the revelation of God's redemptive love that had moved the Corinthians, had drawn them to faith. Their Christian conviction is rooted in God's power, not in Paul's accomplishments and not in human wisdom.

Verses 6-8. However, Paul is careful to keep his readers from thinking that God offers no wisdom or that he himself is unable to grasp God's wisdom. "Among the mature we do speak wisdom," Paul writes. First-century Corinth had plenty of contact with so-called mystery religions, where the ones called mature (Greek *teleios*) were those who had been initiated into "secrets" that made them feel superior to common folk.

Paul clearly was opposed to anything that would divide the Corinthian church, so he was not suggesting that an inner circle should exist whose members had access to secret knowledge. Looking at some of the passages in Chapter 1, we can find evidence that the factionalism within the Corinthian congregation greatly troubled Paul. If he had been acknowledging in 1 Corinthians 2:6-8 the rightful existence of a true spiritual elite, he would have been going against his own previous argument.

Rather, Paul seems to have believed that the truly mature were those who through the process of living the faith with consistency and integrity had increased their understanding. This understanding was founded on the essential gospel, the good news that Jesus Christ died in expression of God's love for humankind.

Paul carefully distinguishes between God's wisdom and that of the rulers of this age. In verse 8 he says that these "rulers of this age ... would not have crucified the Lord of glory" if they had really understood who Jesus was.

The prospect of God's wisdom, secret and hidden, may appeal to certain persons today, just as it did in earlier times. There always seem to be clever leaders around who pull a few followers away from the mainstream. And there are always Christians who want to feel superior to the rest of Christ's body. Cults are formed by leaders who promise such secret wisdom to those who need an extra dose of self-esteem. These leaders will find no help in the writings of Paul, however—unless they distort his words beyond recognition.

Verses 9-10. "No eye has seen, nor ear heard." First Corinthians 2:9 contains some memorable words about the wisdom beyond human understanding that "God has prepared for those who love him." But if Paul is quoting here, where were these words originally written? Are they part of some noncanonical book—some extra-biblical writing—recognizable to Paul's readers but not to our generation? "As it is written" usually indicates that Paul is quoting from Scripture. But Paul was prone to rely on his memory rather than on reading from an actual printed text. No doubt he remembered having encountered those words. But where? The closest we can come to finding the quotation in the Old Testament is Isaiah 64:4; perhaps Paul drew on Isaiah 52:15 and 65:17 as well. If those are the passages Paul is referring to, he is freely adapting them to help his readers remember the promises of the gospel.

Verses 11-13. These verses compare God's Spirit and the human spirit that is within every person. We know what is truly human because

we are alive and have a human spirit or consciousness within us. Indeed, no being can comprehend what it means to be human unless that being has some form of human consciousness or experience. In the same way, no mere human being can comprehend "what is truly God's" without possessing the Spirit of God.

Paul could, of course, remember the days that led to his journey down the Damascus road. He was being "truly human" when he hated and feared the "followers of the way" (Acts 9:1-2). Ananias, too, was being "truly human" when he first refused God's direction to find Saul and heal his blindness (Acts 9:10-14). God's will for the Gentiles—for us—came about because these two men found community obeying "not the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God ... not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:12-13).