

1 Corinthians 1:17-31 • Wisdom & Power

Introduction

The city of Corinth was extremely diverse culturally, more of a melting pot of many cultures rather than having a distinct personality or influence of its own. The two biggest influences are the Jews and the Greeks which is quite a contrast. The Jews' search for spiritual truth required it be accompanied by a sign. Not just a miracle but something spectacular from Heaven. The Greeks sought spiritual truth through wisdom, their evaluation of which was based on the elegance and rhetoric of the speech and arguments great orators or speakers presented. One group's wisdom is based on signs, the other on communication skills. The Gospel came through Paul and was accepted by both groups with wisdom and power, but not precisely in accord with how they would interpret wisdom and power.

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.

¹⁸For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

[Read 1:17-18]

Q: Is Paul stating that he does not believe in baptism or that it's unnecessary? How did Paul implement baptism in his ministry?

A: Analysis of Acts indicates that he probably baptized the very first converts when establishing a church but largely delegated the responsibility of baptism to his ministry team or deacons. The team followed up by building the church up and ensuring that new believers completely understood the purpose of baptism. Apparently this didn't have the effect in Corinth as it did in other places as here they quarreled and boasted regarding who baptized them.

Q: What's wrong with preaching really well? Why is Paul worried that a clever presentation might negate the Gospel?

A: The art of rhetoric was one of the most prized abilities of the day, especially in Corinth where one of the most popular forms of entertainment was oratory and debate. It's an extension of their quarrel as to which personality they clung to more. Paul is trying to get them to look beyond man to the source: Jesus Christ. [Read 1:9, "God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."] They should be unified in their fellowship with one another through Christ, not divided as to which apostle they favored best.

Q: What are the two basic groups Paul identifies in v.18?

A: "...those who are perishing..." and "...us who are being saved..."

Q: Why is it significant that these conditions are described in the present tense?

A: It describes the current earthly situation for believers and non-believers. One is in the process of dying, the other being rescued from death.

Q: How is the Gospel – or “the word of the cross” as Paul calls it in v.18 – viewed by each group? They're witnesses of the same events/message, yet how do they describe it?

A: "Foolishness" and "the power of God".

Q: How could two groups, viewing the same events and hearing the same message, come to such radically different conclusions?

A: It's not a matter of knowledge but faith.

¹⁹For it is written,

“I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE,
AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE.”

²⁰Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

²¹For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

²²For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; ²³but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

[Read 1:19-20]

Q: So why can't man understand the Gospel like any other discipline, science or topic he's analyzed under the sun?

A: Because God has intervened to make it an issue the mind cannot fathom until the heart is given over to Him.

Q: Who might the 3 types of people described in v.20 represent?

A: “The wise man” is everyone in general (someone applying their intellect), “the scribe” is the Jew (someone looking for a confirming sign), and “the debater” the Greek (someone seeking to explain things through a higher wisdom).

Q: How does the world display its foolishness in regards to the Gospel?

A: Not because of its lack of **knowledge** but of its lack of **faith** in Christ crucified.

[Read 1:21]

Q: Has any scientific endeavor, any new technology or discovery, any academic research ever discovered man's duty to or relationship with God?

A: No. It has only come about through revelation – through a step of **faith** completely outside the domain of man's knowledge. As stated at the end of this verse, the Gospel can only save those who **believe**.

[Read 1:22-25]

Q: Paul consciously knows the Jews want signs and the Greeks want wisdom. Why doesn't he customize the Gospel to their beliefs so they'll be won over?

A: Trick question: He already has. The problem for each group is their pride which prevents them from believing. The Gospel of Christ's crucifixion is a sign that trips up the Jews and confounds the Greeks. The process of presenting the truth of the Gospel breaks down barriers of pride that can't be overcome simply with knowledge.

Q: How is it that “the called” understand that Christ is both the ultimate sign and wisdom of God but the Jews and Greeks referred to here do not?

A: “The called” believe.

Q: How does Paul put man's power and wisdom into perspective in v.25?

A: Even the most foolish thing of God is wiser than the highest wisdom of man, and the weakest thing of God stronger than the strongest thing of men.

²⁶For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; ²⁷but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, ²⁸and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, ²⁹so that no man may boast before God.

[Read 1:26-29]

Q: Do we have any Biblical examples of these verses in action, where God used people who by worldly standards would have been the wrong choices? Or where he nullified the “things that are” with “the things that are not”?

- God created dozens of nations from Abraham.
- God created the entire nation of Israel from one grandson of Abraham.
- God used the youngest son of Jacob, a former slave, to rule over Egypt and save Jacob’s family (Joseph).
- How about Rahab, Esther, Gideon or Samuel?
- David was the youngest of seven, and a shepherd to boot, who was elevated to King of Israel and the bloodline of the Messiah.
- Look at the situations from which all the prophets of the OT were called and the results of God’s working.
- From the childless couple Zecharias and Elizabeth, John the Baptist was brought forth.
- From the virgin Mary, the Messiah was born.
- The Apostles.
- The feeding of the 5,000 and 4,000, the changing of the water into wine, and probably on through nearly every miracle and sign performed in the course of Christ’s earthly ministry.
- The ultimate “nothing to something”: Raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of the Father.
- Pentecost.

Q: What does Paul want us to always remember concerning our calling?

A: That it has come from God. We cannot boast that it has come about by our own power or wisdom but only from God.

Point: What is the application of this for us individually and then for our local church as a whole?

[Read 1:30-31]

Q: So God not only defuses earthly wisdom when it comes to understanding the power and message of the cross, but gives true understanding of them as we are drawn into Christ. What does Christ then become to us in our understanding and acceptance of the Gospel?

A: Wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification (notice how these 2 things are joined together to represent power or “the sign”), and this wisdom and power works for our redemption. (Back to v.1:18)

[Read Jeremiah 9:23-24]

Point: Ever notice how every poll places you in a category such as “Baby Boomer” or “Republican” and so forth?

- Do you really see yourself transcending all earthly labels and belonging to God through Christ alone?
- Do you see your church and ministry affiliations as part of an organization or an extension of the whole, world-wide church?
- Do you claim to belong to something whose label places itself above Christ?
- Do you see yourself from God’s perspective or through the world’s interpretation?

³⁰But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, ³¹so that, just as it is written, “LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.”

²³Thus says the Lord, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; ²⁴but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the Lord.