



151st Church of Christ
Small Group Study Guide – 1 CORINTHIANS
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AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians
TEACHER – Lesson 4

GENERAL OUTLINE

1 Corinthians 1:18-4:21, Human vs. divine wisdom

OUTLINE: Lesson 4

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

1-5, Preaching the cross

6-16, Spiritual versus natural perception

In verse 18 of chapter 1, Paul opened his discussion of the powerful wisdom of God as compared to what the secular world considers powerful and wise. It could be that the evangelists mentioned earlier (Apollos, Cephas and himself) each had a particular style of speaking, as would be expected. And different listeners may have preferred one style or the other. Paul doesn't deny individuality but calls for discernment. The style might be nice, but the content of the message was what mattered. He now admits that by certain standards, his own method was not stylish, and intentionally so. He wanted converts to know the gospel and be convicted by the content rather than the manner of presentation.

DISCUSSION

1 Corinthians 2:1-5, Preaching the cross

1. Remembering the work of Paul in Acts (e.g., in Athens, 17:22ff; in Ephesus, 19:8; in Jerusalem, 22:1ff), do you think that Paul was a good speaker/preacher? Did he deliberately do less than his best?

- Paul didn't give priority to preaching style. He wanted people to be convinced by the content of his message, which was: You are saved by the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ.

2. By what criteria do you think the Corinthians divided into preacher "groups" (1:12)? What do we know of the abilities and preaching styles of the men mentioned in that verse?

- We have an example of Peter's preaching in Acts 2:14-29; 3:12-26
- Apollos' abilities are described briefly in Acts 18:24-28.

Note that Paul doesn't criticize the various preachers, but rather the listeners who applied worldly standards as they listened.

- Apparently, they were looking at the eloquence or perceived prestige of a favorite preacher or the preacher who baptized them.

3. What do we admire in preaching or in worship that may obscure or replace the content of the message? Should preachers try to be intentionally dull?

- Many Corinthians admired "philosophy" = men's reasoning.
- We admire many things. For example:
 - a. Psychology: Counseling seminars draw better than gospel meetings. Sometimes we trust pop psychology to solve personal problems rather than the gospel.*
 - b. Evangelistic methods: If we use the right method.*
 - c. Media glitz: Sometimes bells & whistles, stories, jokes, etc., cover up a lack of content.*
 - d. Experience-centered "worship" that is described as "sit back and enjoy the concert."*

4. If Paul had written 1:17 followed immediately by 2:1, it would have been an accurate description of HOW he preached. What does the passage 1:18-31 (our previous lesson) add to his message by explaining WHY he preached?

- It tells WHY he preached the way he did. It shows how his actions were guided by doctrine and conviction.
- His preaching reflected his trust in God's wisdom over the wisdom and expectations of the world.

5. The chapter division after 1:31 may seem unfortunate, but in another way it makes sense. What key pronoun in reference to Paul shows up in 2:1-5, but was totally absent in 1:18-31? What does this tell us about the progression of thought?

- Paul avoids the 1st person singular "I" in 1:18-31. He is presenting the distinct contrast between God's idea of wisdom and power, and that of the world. As of chapter 2, he describes how his own preaching applied that doctrinal idea, i.e., "And I, brethren...."
- In other words Paul is saying, "This (1:18-31) is the nature of the gospel, and this (2:1-5) is how it was reflected in my ministry."

1 Corinthians 2:6-16, Spiritual versus natural perception

2:6-16, The spiritual versus the natural

It is extremely important to look within the context. Is Paul saying something here that remains more mysterious than the mystery he says has been revealed? Is he introducing some “spiritual” topic out of the blue, and for which our best understanding will be little more than a guess? OR, is he building on things already stated and central to the message? How does this passage fit the context of the preceding and following sections?

Paul has emphasized the mystery revealed as being the gospel, and asserted that Jews & Gentiles followed worldly wisdom, which caused them to reject the gospel as a foolish and weak message. This should guide us in unraveling Paul’s message to the Corinthian Christians who had taken the first step of believing and accepting the gospel.

6. What key opposing words and thoughts were repeated throughout 1:18-2:5? What new opposing words are now repeatedly added to them?

- 1:18-2:5, Wisdom v. foolishness, power v. weakness, weak v. mighty, shame v. glory, excellence of speech v. Christ crucified, weakness, fear & trembling v. Spirit & power, wisdom of men v. power of God.
- 2:6-16, Spiritual v. natural, “of this age” (world) v. of God, spirit of man (world) v. Spirit of God

7. What kind of Messiah did Jews of the 1st century expect? Why? What kind of Christ did God send? How does that idea reflect the statement of verse 9? (Verse 9 is thought to be based on Isaiah 64:3, 4, but it is not an exact quotation. See also Isaiah 55:8.)

- In His wisdom, God sent the only kind of Messiah that would solve the sin problem. But the wisdom of man did not expect, and would not accept, that kind of Messiah. That is the message of 1 Cor 1:18-26.
- It is possible that 1 Cor 2:2 is the key to the entire 2nd chapter. It presents the ultimate expression of God’s wisdom and power that is rejected or ignored by human wisdom.

8. If man’s wisdom rejected the kind of Messiah God provided (i.e., a crucified one), what should be expected if our approach to Christian living is also drawn from the “natural” wisdom of the world?

- We’ll get it wrong.
- This was the problem in Corinth.

9. Does one need to be miraculously inspired to “spiritually discern” God’s will for His people? How were uninspired Jews and Gentiles supposed to believe in the crucified Christ? How were Christians, as in Corinth, supposed to understand how to live and mature as Christians? (Consult Acts 2:22-24 & 3:12-15; John 14:26; Hebrews 2:2-4)

- No, we don’t need to be personally inspired as long as we have the teachings of the apostles who were inspired. Note that at no point so far, or later in the letter, will Paul excuse sinful behavior on grounds of insufficient revelation or inspiration.
- The crucified Christ was not expected, but he was made known through the things Jesus did (Acts 2:22-24). Spiritually minded Jews and Gentiles could recognize and accept him as 3000 did on Pentecost. Naturally minded people would reject him as a foolish stumbling block (Acts 3:12-15).
- Instructions on Christian living remain foolish when evaluated by human, natural wisdom and standards. Faithful living comes by an openness to what God’s Spirit has revealed through his prophets, his apostles and his Christ (John 14:26; Hebrews 2:2-4).

10. Paul concedes that in times past (that is, under the Old Testament), much of God’s plan for man was still a mystery (v. 7). But by the time of this writing, he maintains that what we need to know had been revealed. To what cause, then, does he attribute the failure to receive and obey the things taught by the Spirit?

- When we rely on the “natural man” and worldly wisdom, we will consider God’s ways to be foolishness, meaning we won’t trust them to work in our world.
- Only by constant discernment will we be able to determine when we are taking our cues from the world instead of from God’s word.

Note: Chapter 2 serves as an important transition into the main message of the book. The second half of chapter 1 affirmed that Jews and Gentiles had rejected the message of the crucified Christ because they evaluated the gospel by human wisdom and standards. The current chapter elaborates on this teaching about trusting God’s wisdom rather than our own, or that of the world around us.

In chapter 3, he will bring this basic message to bear on the problems in the Corinthian church. He will affirm that they were carnally minded, which was the same reason Jews and Gentiles had rejected the gospel in chapter 1. In the same way Christians, when we revert to natural, worldly wisdom, will live contrary to God’s will. The Corinthian church was an early example of this principle.

In short, Christians failed to grow up in Christ for the same reason many people never became Christians – they followed man’s wisdom instead of God’s. Only as they learned to see things from God’s spiritual perspective would the Corinthian saints become the mature, godly people God wanted them to be.