

The Conflict of Two Wisdoms – 1 Corinthians 1-3

The Divine Pattern of Spiritual Studies

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As expressed in previous articles, it is essential that we know the Biblical development of a topic based on prime texts that address it. When discussing the Biblical approach to theology and doctrine, we would be at a loss to miss the clarity of 1 Corinthians 1-3. In it God has declared the supremacy of His wisdom as well as how believers are to apply it. As we delve into the study of Bible doctrine, we are entering into the sphere of Divine wisdom, something which must be handled on a Divine basis. This text gives that basis. So then, our approach will be this: we will look at the meaning of the text and then apply it specifically to our own doctrinal studies. While man is busy figuring out the best theological method, God has already given the right one; and we are obligated to tremble at it.

BACKGROUND

In this first section of Paul's epistle (1:1-17), he brings before Corinth a few foundational concepts which would constantly reappear throughout the epistle. One concept is his apostleship, emphasized again in chapters 4 and 9. Another is the holiness of the local assembly, which appears again in chapters 3, 5, 6, and 7. As well, he emphasizes unity in spiritual gifts – unity which could only be accomplished through Christ. Thus, we have the great section on public worship from chapter 11 to chapter 14. He also mentions the Coming of the Lord Jesus, which he takes up again in chapter 15. Understanding these emphases of 1 Corinthians will help us appreciate the content of chapters 1-4.

Greeting

Paul begins his letter by emphasizing both his apostleship and the uniqueness of the local assembly. By designating himself as an apostle who was called according to the will of God, he establishes from the outset that his ministry and its content was entirely of God. This is a theme that carries throughout the epistle.

As to the assembly, he acknowledges it to be a company of “those sanctified in Christ Jesus,” as those who are “saints by calling.” This identification belonged, of course, not only to Corinth, but to all believers who called upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is Lord of every believer; therefore, He is the source of fellowship between every believer. This is a fellowship which Paul emphasized at the beginning, no doubt, to provide a foundation for his later comments on unity.

Though living two millennia after the existence of Corinth, the lessons carry on to us. As we read the first section of 1 Corinthians, our obligation is to realize two things. First, we must realize that Paul's words in this epistle are wholly of God. The comments made on the wisdom

of God were not simply a “Pauline approach.” Rather, they constitute the Divine approach: God's pattern for understanding, appreciating, and acting on His revelation. We must never question for a second the utter necessity of obedience to what will be emphasized in these chapters. Second, we must realize that we too are sanctified – saints by the calling of God, unified by our common Lord. This is the loftiest position offered to man. When God presents a pattern that coincides with our calling, that is a dignified pattern which cannot be improved upon. If statements from Scripture should be made that sound counter-academic, the problem lies with academia, not God's approach.

The Richness of Knowledge in Corinth

Corinth was not only generally gifted by God in sanctification, but they had special visitation in terms of spiritual gifts. Particularly, they were gifted in speech and knowledge, which are probably overall categories of spiritual gifts they were known for (see ch. 12), including tongues, interpretation, and prophecy as well as wisdom, knowledge, and discernment. Paul made sure to emphasize his thankfulness for this and correctly attribute it to God's grace brought in by gospel preaching.

But, as usual, Paul's thankfulness for the present turned into anticipation for the future, and he reminded the Christians of their blessed hope, the Rapture. This outlook would remind them of two things: (1) the assurance of God's faithfulness to the believers until the end, (2) the solemnity of their call to be blameless and live according to their fellowship with Christ.

Corinth serves as a valuable lesson to all of us: despite their richness in terms of gift, they needed to be refocused upon the true Wisdom of God, which is Christ. Even with their knowledge, they could not see the danger of exalting man. If the only thing we have in theology is man and his talents, we have nothing more than the world does. We want unity to grow out of our theology. We want a Christ-exalting outlook to sprout from our knowledge. We want faithfulness in light of the Coming of Christ. The world can have great orators and scholars; what it cannot have is the mind of Christ. We need more than mere knowledge in our theology; we need Christ to be central in that knowledge.

The Need for Christ-Centered Unity in Corinth

Having made his initial greeting, Paul advances to his plea for unity amongst the Corinthians. So necessary was unity in Corinth that Paul invoked the name/authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, as if the Overseer of assemblies was speaking directly to them (cf. Rev. 1-3) – and He was. What should this unity have looked like? Verse 10 explains: “Now I beg of you... that you all speaking the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” These emphases will be applied later.

As to what their disunity looked like, Paul was informed by the family of Chloe that there were sectarian contentions within the assembly. It was essentially denominationalism. Some claimed allegiance to Paul, some to Apollos, some to Peter, and some to Christ. To this Paul asked three rhetorical questions: “Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” The answer to all of these is “no.” In fact, Paul went to great lengths to abstain from baptizing others, just to prove that Christ crucified was the true center of

his ministry. Christ is the singular Lord of both Christianity and each local assembly. Were this properly recognized, there would have been no room for division. It is from this point that he begins to develop the thought of “Christ the Wisdom of God,” leading up to his climactic statement in chapter 3, “Therefore, let no man glory in men.”

When we study the wisdom of God expressed in Bible doctrine, our goal in local assembly capacity is to see unity formed through Christ's exaltation. This unity will take on three main forms: (1) *doctrinal unity*: Corinth was to “speak the same thing” and be joined together “in the same mind.” This advocates unity in both personal belief and collective teaching. Unless an assembly has doctrinal unity, it will not have any other type of unity. (2) *practical unity*: Paul's wish was that “there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together.” This is not simply nominal unity, but this is complete unity in purpose, in love, in action, and in allegiance. If an assembly only has a written creed to bind it together, it will not be an assembly for long. There must be organic singularity founded upon teaching. If we cannot both learn together and work together, something is wrong. (3) *judgmental unity*: this is what leads us to common doctrine. We all must have the same standards of truth. If we are going to believe together, we must discern together.

THE WISDOM OF GOD: DOCTRINALLY EXPRESSED

Having addressed the problem of division in Corinth, Paul begins to lay a doctrinal foundation for his bold comments in chapter 3. Basically he wants to draw the attention of the Corinthians to God and His ways which are only perceived by spiritual means. They had been carnal in thought; Paul emphasizes spiritual thought. They had exalted man; Paul exalts God. They had failed to discern; Paul emphasizes discernment. All of this was founded upon God's most recent and most explicit revelation which was once hidden, that is, Christ crucified, made unto us righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. It is this wisdom that is true, and only the spiritually-minded can comprehend it and appreciate it.

Christ the Power and Wisdom of God

Coming from his statement in verse 17, that he did not rely on clever speech to persuade the Corinthians, Paul proceeded to say what he *did* rely on: it was the message of the cross. Though the form of preaching is involved in Paul's statement, his emphasis is on the content of the message – his “proclamation.” It is this proclamation that divides the world into two categories: those who are perishing and those who are being saved. To the former, the proclamation is foolish, weak, and pathetic – a waste of time! But to the latter, who constantly live in the good of God's delivering power and look to a future day, it is unadulterated power from the energy of the living God. God designed it this way so that man-made wisdom would be stripped of all its apparent merit. Whether the philosopher, the scholarly legalist, or the debating logician, God has humiliated all of them and revealed their foolishness masquerading as “wisdom.” The world had its chance to make sense of divine things, but it could never grasp the true God. In fact, it rejected Him. So then, the Jews keep looking for signs, but they find none. The Greeks keep searching for a true philosophy, but they only find theory. And they will

always embrace blindness until their humanist arrogance is humbled. "It pleased God by the foolishness of the proclamation to save them that believe." It is only selfless faith which appreciates God's wisdom. As long as man relies on religion and philosophy, the cross will only stumble him.

But when a man is finally relieved of his blindness, he sees Christ as true wisdom and true power, though of an entirely different order than man's. Man only sees the cross as foolishness and weakness, not because it is too low for him, but because it is actually beyond his capacity to understand. Thus, the problem is not with God, but with man. The reality is that in God is all true wisdom, and Christ is the expression of that, both in His Person and in His cross. The man called into divine light realizes this. Whether the Jew seeking after a sign, or a Greek seeking after wisdom, when Christ is realized all their objections drop, and He is embraced as true power (the answer to religion) and true wisdom (the answer to philosophy).

It is perhaps in this area that theologians on a whole are discontented most. A survey of the field of theology will show the natural tendency of man to drift into "Churchianity" and religion or philosophy. Why is this so? Because both religion and philosophy give man a part to play – religion outwardly, philosophy inwardly. Many defenses have been made throughout the years on combining philosophy and theology, but they simply do not mix. The world's system is separate from the Christian community. When academic theology can interact well with liberal theories and worldly reasoning, something is terribly wrong. It should be a unique study that the world cannot relate to. It should be a restricted study that the world cannot have part in. Theology belongs to conservative Christians who view their study from a Christ-centered mindset. It is not simply about academic exercise; it is about beseeching God, "O God, show me your glory!" When He shows us His glory, there is enough to occupy us without the hypotheticals of philosophy and the additions of religion. Christ is the wisdom we seek. Christ is the power we seek. If we are mocked by the higher critics for being honest with the Scriptures and their prescribed approach, so be it. Academia may be prominent, but it has never yielded a better method of sanctification nor produced a lovelier message than "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." See if academia can change lives like this message has! "See that there be no one who shall lead you away as a prey through philosophy and vain deceit, according to the teaching of men, according to the elements of the world, and not according to Christ." (Col. 2:8, Darby).

Glorying in the Lord

Having belabored the point that God has wisdom apart from man-made methods and conceptions, Paul provokes the Corinthians to think about how they saw this practically. In their own experience, it was the person of a simpler life that received the gospel. It wasn't the philosopher. It wasn't the powerful. It wasn't the elite. God saved those who were not clouded by human standards of greatness. In doing this, He put to shame the wise and the mighty, using things that were regarded as nothing and destroying the value of things regarded as something. This way there was no possible means by which man could boast of his own merit – not in terms of works, not in terms of method, not in terms of wisdom. Man is totally and utterly nothing when it comes to the work of God. There is no place for man to boast before God, for God says, "My glory I will not give to another."

But while man reasons in circles and cannot find true answers, God has made Christ our sufficient answer. Christ, being the substance of God's wisdom, is our righteousness, our sanctification, and our redemption. Man tried to better himself: he failed. Man tried to be holy before God on his own basis: he failed. Man tried to rid himself of sin's consequences: he failed. But while man stood by helpless, God displayed His wisdom and accomplished all of these things in Christ. When all is said and done, man will have no part in God's great work except to glorify Him for it and to boast in Him because of it.

This is why theology exists as well. God wants to show us something of Christ. Our motive cannot be intellectual expansion; that would be worldly. Our motive cannot be religious accomplishment; that would be worldly. Our motive cannot be recognition; that would be worldly. Our goal in competently handling the truth is this: the knowledge of Christ made part of our very reality.

"Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ. And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death..." (Phil. 3:8-10)

The Power of God in His Wisdom

What Paul believed in terms of gospel preaching was evidenced clearly in his approach with the Corinthians in their earlier days. When he preached among them, he had one goal: to declare the unadulterated testimony of God. In doing this, he did not mingle that testimony with philosophical or religious connotations; rather he had a simple message: "Christ and Him crucified." The fact is, Paul could have brought religion or philosophy into his presentation of the gospel; as Acts 19 shows, he was clearly competent in debating both topics. But he rather came trembling in fear and in weakness, being sure to empty his preaching of human eloquence; thus, by emptying himself, he allowed the Spirit to work in full and undeniable power. He could not bear the thought of the Corinthians resting in human wisdom and manipulative speeches; he wanted a lasting work from the hand of God that would be unmistakably His. Only by letting the wisdom of God have its place would the power of God be truly evident.

When we study God through His Word, our goal is to study it His way so that His power through the Word might be truly evident. This is especially important for teachers of the Word to understand. Psychological manipulation will always be a means to convince man according to his flesh-based inclinations. But this has no place when a work from God is the aim. A true teacher of the Word will have three qualities that fit him to declare the testimony of God.

First, he will recognize the weight of his ministry. Was this not Paul's key to success? It was through his fear and much trembling that the Spirit in all His power shone. Paul was not delivering a philosophy lecture, which would change its relevance only in a matter of years. He

was handling the things of God: that demands a method that is thoroughly God's. The application is this: we must recognize the weight of handling Scripture. When one forms a theological position and conveys that to a hearer, it cannot but have "Thus saith the Lord" written all over it. There is no element in Bible doctrine that is from man; therefore, there should be no element in Bible doctrine approached on man's basis or with a liberal attitude. Doctrine belongs thoroughly to God. When we are allowed to handle it, it is because God has drawn us into recognition of spiritual reality, higher than man's systems. Thus, we cannot degrade doctrine by approaching it as if a man-based system. We must recognize the weight of what we handle.

Second, he will rest, not in manipulation, but in the simplicity of God's wisdom and power – simple, not because they lack complexity, but because they are solely of God. In preaching the Word or in communicating spiritual truth by any means, there is the tendency to aim for results, rather than for genuine quality. Thus many in so-called conservative Evangelicalism adopt pragmatism as their theological method. In this instance, the Christian cliché, "What you win them with is what you win them to" is quite helpful. Paul knew that if he won the Corinthians with man's wisdom, man's wisdom would be the limit of their faith and aspirations. But if he won them by the wisdom and power of God, beginning to end, only then would there be true fruit. God forbid we degrade ourselves to using fallen man as our standard of persuasion. When philosophy, psychology, and politics replace Biblical preaching, God ceases to be glorified and man takes the central place. God's wisdom applied by God's power will always be enough for the true theologian.

Third, he will aim for a proper trust in God among the people he ministers to. What a contradiction it would be to preach, resting in man's wisdom, while trying to convey a trust in God's power! God must have centrality in all things. God is the object of our studies, He is the source of our studies, and He is the goal of our studies. When we rest on man's wisdom, we get man's power and man's glory. When we rest on God's wisdom, we gain Divine power, and God gets the glory. The wisdom adhered to, the power trusted in, and the glory aimed for will always coincide. If man has part in any of these factors, he receives the glory. But if God will (and He must) receive the glory He deserves, it must be God beginning to end.

The Blindness of the World

Lest his readers would feel deprived in that the world's wisdom was taken from them, Paul strips it of all its merit by saying it is nothing and has only resulted in blindness. Up to this point, Paul has portrayed the wisdom of God increasingly wiser. First, he presents God's wisdom as being "foolishness." Then he presents God's wisdom alongside man's wisdom, almost as if they were just two different tracks of thought. But now, he openly says that man's wisdom is no wisdom at all. In fact, God's wisdom is the only true wisdom – a wisdom, however, only spiritually-minded people can appreciate. On the one hand, man's wisdom has come to nothing, while God's wisdom stands firm and offers to us the hope of glory. On the one hand, man in his wisdom was blind to all of God's purposes, while we by Divine revelation have these things given to us. The reality is that man, when resting on his wisdom, has no claim on divine things: God has deliberately hidden His wisdom from such. By crucifying the Lord of Glory, man plainly evidenced that. So then, it is not about the eye that man sees with, nor the

ear that man hears with, nor the heart that man perceives with – all these have utterly failed to reach and understand God. Rather, it is about Divine wisdom, only understandable by Divine means.

As we enter into doctrinal studies, there is no need to feel intimidation toward the academic “greats” of philosophy, religion, psychology, and politics that contradict what the spiritual Bible student sees in Scripture. Their wisdom as to Divine things has been brought to nothing; it ceases to have any merit. It does not matter how well-constructed a theological argument is if man's wisdom forms its basis. God has barred human wisdom from tapping into his great truth. We therefore have no reason to be intimidated by it. This also applies to the Evangelical community, for believers are not exempt from using man's wisdom as their basis for belief. Thus we must be careful of believers who are partly Biblical and partly “religious,” philosophical, psychological, or political. The approach of natural man and the approach of the spiritual man are totally and completely incompatible. But that is no threat to us as believers. We are objects of God's deep love and majestic purposes, and the wisdom He reveals to us coincides with this. The world has emptiness and blind ambition. Why, then, would we feel lacking without man's wisdom? Maybe if we called it “man's blindness” or “man's foolishness” we would not be so persuaded by it.

The Light of Spiritual Teaching

The latter half of chapter 2 is where we get to the heart of studying Scripture, for we learn the means by which we understand it. No article on theological method can surpass the profundity of this passage.

Verse 9 presents us with things that no man knows by merely natural means. Man is marked by utter blindness to, not only the things of God in general, but especially the blessings of God to believers. Thankfully, we are not blind to the blessings which God has prepared for us, because we are recipients of revelation through the Spirit.

So then, we are presented with two extremes. On the one hand, the natural man is totally cut off from the wisdom of God. On the other hand, we are freely given the Spirit Who has perfect understanding of the deep things of God. To substantiate the first clause in verse 10, Paul (through the very Spirit he writes about) gives two aspects of the Spirit's relation to God: (1) He searches all things, especially the depths of God. This Revealer of God's wisdom is himself occupied with plumbing the depths of God, not because of ignorance but because He actually can embrace all there is to God. (2) He has perfect knowledge of the things of God, just as the spirit of man only truly knows man. Thus, the things of God are not an occupation the Spirit has outside Himself; rather, they are intrinsic to Him. This is the believer's Teacher!

This is where Paul applies the previous truth to practical experience. In verse 12, he emphasizes first of all, what we do *not* have: the spirit of the world – that overarching principle embedded in the world's system which acts on natural man's basis and foundations, while maintaining God-ward blindness. On the contrary, having received the Spirit of God we are illuminated as to what God has freely given to us. And while we do not necessarily “feel” or “see” these blessings, we enjoy them doctrinally through the climactic revelation of God's wisdom. This comes through teaching – a concept which Paul defended very strictly. He not only defended spiritual concepts, but spiritual means of teaching. In other words, just as man

has both man-made *things* to teach and man-made *means* to teach, so the Spirit has His own substance to teach and His own means of delivery.

Thus Paul begins to conclude this doctrinal section by summarizing. His main thesis is this: handling the wisdom of God is a thoroughly spiritual activity. Natural man has proven this by his lack of cognition toward the things of God. There are three reasons behind this: (1) *His Identity Apart from the Spirit*. Natural man is just that: natural. What we was born with as a fallen creature is all he possesses. He is *soulish*, having the same self-satisfying inclinations as animals and knowing nothing of true God-ward consciousness. Such forbids the revelation of the Spirit to enter his mind. His problem is not with the existence of revelation, but the reception of it. God can only be known by knowledge He gives; He cannot be figured out. Thus, if man is left without capacity to receive things of God's Spirit, he has *no* handle on them whatsoever. Any revelation is fully of God. (2) *His View of God's Wisdom*. To natural man, the things of God's Spirit are foolishness. Man in his pride generally dismisses what he does not know as foolish or vain, simply because he cannot relate to it. Such is the case with God's wisdom. Man has absolutely no claim on it; thus, he despises it – not intelligently, but ignorantly. (3) *His Inability to Know Divine Things*. Building on the first reason, man cannot know the things of God because of his identity. The things of God are spiritually discerned: when man has no Spirit, no spiritual life, and no revelation, he literally *cannot* know the things of the Spirit.

On the other hand, still proving Paul's thesis, we find positively that Spirit-minded people do have a grip on God's things. Verse 14 says, "the things of the Spirit of God... are spiritually discerned / perceived-and-examined." This is proven by those who are spiritual (those who receive the Spirit and His revelation), for they do have the ability to judge and discern all things, since they have the Spirit Who "searches all things." Yet these spiritual persons cannot be perceived and understood by natural man. Unregenerate persons cannot relate to Spirit-minded persons: their entire scheme of thought differs. That which is spiritual is thoroughly spiritual. That which is nonspiritual is thoroughly nonspiritual.

In concluding all of this, Paul makes a bold statement: "For who has known the mind of the Lord, who shall instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ." This is a quotation from Isaiah 40, in which God is setting Himself totally apart as the unique Almighty YAHWEH.

"Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being his counsellor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and showed to him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket... All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity. To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him?"

Basically the question "Who shall instruct Him?" is rhetorical. The answer is, "No one!" *And yet*, though the mind of the Lord was exclusive to Himself for long ages, to New Testament believers, we actually share in the very mind of Christ. The Triune God has given Himself wholly to us. The Father by His Spirit has brought us into the mind of Christ (Who, by the way, cannot but be Yahweh Himself, based on deliberate parallelism with the quotation). We have the mind of Christ. There is no possibility of exhausting the power of this statement.

As we enter into the study of doctrine, we need to realize that this is a thoroughly

spiritual study. The idea of combining philosophy with theology, psychology with Christian ethics, and politics with Christian standards is utterly erroneous in light of this chapter. Man's systems of thought and organization should not intimidate us in the least. We have the mind of Christ. They have blindness. How is the mind of Christ not sufficient? How would man's wisdom even remotely contribute to God's perfect plan of self-revelation, except to reveal its own baseness?

Furthermore, we must understand that the study of doctrine has potential beyond limit. Consider the factors. The Spirit of God is the One Who knows *fully* all the depths of God, and it is this Spirit Who is given to teach us. So great is His work in us that, having been born of the Spirit, we share in the mind of Christ. Any hindrance related to this is due to our flesh, but there is nothing in what God offers that hinders our search to really know Him. He has not restricted Himself from us in the least. The blessings He gives are freely given. The revelation He gives is profound and comprehensive. The fellowship He gives is the sharing of the very mind of Christ – insight into His understanding of Divine purposes. If the sciences of man are a puddle, the study of God is a shoreless ocean without a floor. Alone, we would drown in that ocean; but we are led by His hand into the depths of knowing Him.

Finally, we must also admit the centrality of God's method in all of this. Theology is not only to be true: it is to be handled and taught God's way. God has advocated two main means of Biblical education: (1) Searching the Scriptures (Acts 17:11), (2) Teaching of the Word in context of or view toward a local assembly, of which the subsets are congregational singing (Eph 5), defense of the faith (Jude), personal teaching (Tit. 2:4), and gospel proclamation (Phil 1). But method not only affects how teaching is done, but by whom (Do we have qualified teachers teaching?), by what standard (Wisdom of man, or wisdom of God?) and why (What is our motivation?). We cannot afford to approach doctrine wrongly, for it is the knowledge of God at stake as well as our appreciation of the blessings He has brought us into.

THE WISDOM OF GOD: PRACTICALLY HANDLED

Having proven through doctrine the superiority of God's wisdom, Paul applies the concepts he has emphasized in a very practical way. He begins with the illustration of a tilled field: the assembly is like a process of planting and watering of which God gives the increase. He continues with the illustration of a building: the assembly is like a structure built upon Christ, which must be built up with good materials. Then he gives the real identity of the assembly: in that it is a building, it is really the temple of God. In this habitation of God, there is no room for man's exaltation, but rather faithfulness as stewards to the One Who is truly exalted. As we handle the truth of Scripture, we must realize it has very practical effects amongst God's people. Theology cannot be done in a bubble; it will always overflow to our work in the assembly. And someday we will give account for that work.

Carnality Expressed in Following Men

Even though the Corinthians had “the mind of Christ,” they could not be taught as if spiritual people. They were walking, not as men of the Spirit, but as men of the flesh – spiritual

children who were incompetent in the things of God. There were reasons for this, as well as consequences that needed to be addressed.

The Result of Carnality: Inability to Receive Solid Spiritual Food. Because of their flesh-based expressions, the Corinthians barricaded their minds from receiving “the deep things of God” which could have been their through the Spirit. They had not developed the spiritual capacity for these things. Rather, they could only comprehend the basics, which required little thought, little meditation, and little digestion. Hebrews says that comprehension of deep truth comes by “exercise of the senses.” Corinth only exercised their human capacities for pride and division; thus they could only relate to the lightest of truths.

The Ruin of Carnality: Envy and Strife Erupt. When believers walk as men (of the flesh), they cannot walk as Christ walked. And when Christ is lost sight of, the basis for unity is gone. When the wisdom of God is embraced, only then can creatures of the dust find themselves truly together in a spiritual activity. Conversely, when the wisdom of man is practiced, contention erupts. Such had the Corinthians proven by experience.

The Root of Carnality: Exaltation of Man. Proverbs says, “Only by pride comes contention.” This held true at Corinth. The cause of their carnality (which caused their division) was the exaltation of mere men, good men though they were. There is only one Man under Whom we unify. The moment believers rally around anyone other than Christ Himself is the moment contentions arise. Christ is honored on the basis of absolute truth. Man is honored based on preference. When Christ is the recognized Head of an assembly, that assembly unifies under truth. When men become recognized as heads in an assembly, their recognition will be based on preference; and as long as preference rules amongst God's people, there will always be division. This is carnality. This is flesh-based thinking. It all begins when man focuses on man.

The Remedy of Carnality: Exaltation of God. To reverse carnality is quite simple: give the Lord His due place. Christ as preeminent is the fountainhead of all spirituality. Paul understanding this asks, “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos? [We are] servants by whom you believed, even as the Lord gave to every man. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that plants any thing, neither he that waters; but God that gives the increase.” As long as man remains the head and the focus, there will be no progress, discernment, or spiritual growth in an assembly. Man is nothing apart from his identity in Christ.

It is a tragedy of tragedies when men (and women) of the flesh are given prominence as spiritual teachers in the theological world. Preachers who live in worldly extravagance and pride are nevertheless on the “bestsellers” list. Christian celebrities, whether in writing, music, or speaking, are usually judged, not by their doctrine, but by their popularity, emotional attractiveness, and conformity to cultural norms. Much of Evangelicalism has perpetuated spiritual infancy, because it has, in many cases, made man the standard of judgment.

This has resulted in ignorant division and denominationalism, both of which demand that men be given undue prominence. Having a visible leader to follow mitigates much personal responsibility to weigh issues and devote much thought to personal beliefs. Such brings belief based on convenience and comfort, rather than on conviction and comprehension. Passiveness and ignorance amongst God's people can be Satan's most subtle tools. Both rely too

heavily on another man, but neither realize personal accountability to Christ.

When we handle the Word of God in any capacity, man's motives, method's, and mentalities only hinder true spiritual work. When man's 'wisdom' is adopted, God's truth appears to be foolish. When man is given preeminence, Christ appears to be divided. As long as believers are intimidated by natural ways of thinking God will never be given His due place. He alone is the source of our unity. He alone is the Revealer of Truth. He alone is the possessor of true wisdom. To be intimidated by nominal Christendom, liberal academia, and the world, something has to happen first: a low view of God must be adopted. In every topic we handle, in every text we interpret, may it ever be that God's wisdom is our boast. Natural man's ways of thinking contribute nothing to godliness or spiritual understanding, except to prove the statement that "God made foolish the wisdom of this world." Let us be thoroughly spiritual. Let us be thoroughly Biblical. Let us not settle for spiritual infancy by adopting worldly mentalities and giving undue prominence to man. It is God Who gives the increase; it is sufficient to adopt His ways alone.

Metaphors of the Assembly

To clarify his metaphor of "planting" and "watering," Paul explains that the local assembly is like God's husbandry, or tilled field. It is His center of fruitfulness. Those who handle God's truth are laborers together with Him to see fruit produced amongst God's people.

As well, the assembly is like a building, a structure built upon Christ Himself, an edifice that is erected as a holy temple of God. Thus, not only does the teacher in an assembly have the burden of fruitfulness on his shoulders, but of strength and holiness.

As we apply the Scriptures in a local assembly (theology should never disconnect itself from the pillar and ground of truth), we must ever realize that it is *God's* assembly. We are handling truth and applying it in coordination with the holy God of Heaven Himself. The theologian does not exist to promote his own ideas or promulgate his technicalities. He exists to strengthen the people of God by applying His truth in His manner. May it never be that man's wisdom become attractive to us when we are dealing with God's things.

Accountability for Labour

Capitalizing on the imagery of a building, Paul speaks of the proclamation of truth as a foundation. In reality, this foundation is Christ, for all of God's wisdom is founded upon and centered around Christ. If Christ is not the foundation, God's wisdom will not be evident. The Corinthian assembly, being built on the gospel of Jesus Christ, had all the potential needed to increase in the deep things of God. But where there is potential to do right, there is always potential to do wrong. Thus, the believer responsible for building according to God's wisdom must pay attention to how he builds and with what material he builds.

There are two categories of materials which one handling the truth of God can "build" with: that which lasts and that which crumbles when tested. Gold, silver, and precious stones connote value and permanence: these materials, taken from within the earth, take time and effort to procure. Wood, hay, and straw are common and very temporary; these materials, taken from the surface of the earth, take relatively little effort to gather. These are illustrative of different ways one can build upon the preaching of the gospel, particularly in God's assembly.

Some men contribute surface teaching – teaching that changes according to man's wisdom and cannot withstand testing. Some men, on the other hand, contribute the deep things of God – teaching that stands forever and brings true value to a local assembly.

Because God is deeply interested in the quality of teaching and edification in His assemblies, He has ordained a day of reward which will reveal the true quality of work put into the local assembly, or broadly, upon Christ. In “the day” (the Day of Christ, no doubt), there will be testing by fire (probably figurative, just as the “building materials” are figurative). What lasts through the fire will be rewarded. What is consumed by the fire will result in loss for the contributor; nevertheless, while the person himself will be saved, he will not escape the testing of his works by fire.

This reality causes us to handle and apply our theology with trembling. When the truth is obvious, it must never be “sold,” compromised, or left unapplied. There is no room for this, for God's house must be built up with His own supplied materials. When building up “the pillar and ground of the truth,” good motives are simply not good enough. We need reality. We need truth. We need God's way. Only His way grants permanence and value.

When it comes to the understanding of and application of God's truth, are we investing garbage into God's assembly? Do we settle with ingorant cliches, unfounded opinions, and personal preference as a good framework to apply Scripture? Or are we thoughtful and diligent in our spiritual contributions? Will God's people get something from God through us, or something from man? “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever.”

The Assembly: God's Holy Temple

In verses 16 and 17, we find that this “building” is really a temple of God, which is made real by the Spirit's dwelling within the assembly. Because God is holy, His temple is holy. And because God's temple is holy, God will return destruction on those who destroy that temple. Corruption will be the lot of those who corrupt God's holy building. How is one to destroy an assembly? By exalting man. When man is exalted, factions arise, the “foolishness” of preaching is discounted, divine light is withheld, man's wisdom is applied rather than God's, and common materials are used to build the assembly.

It is interesting that neither the wood, hay, and stubble nor the corruption of God's assembly are outright acts of persecution or similar dangers. Neither are they the *absence* of effort. They are more commonly subtle than conspicuous. They disguise themselves as “modernization,” “efficiency,” “strategy,” “loyalty,” or a host of other obscure words. But the reality is this: when man and his wisdom is exalted, God and His wisdom is disgraced. They are so incompatible that diversion from God's wisdom becomes subversion of it.

God's assembly is holy. The teaching that goes into it, the doctrine that makes it up, is of a completely different order than that of man's organizations. If we really see God's assembly as holy, we will regard absolute faithfulness as necessary – faithfulness in doctrine, faithfulness in practice, faithfulness in worship. If an the assembly is to be fully for God, it has to be fully of God. Our doctrine must be handled and applied with the realization of this.

Becoming Fools to Be Wise

To keep the assembly holy, the Corinthians were directed to humble themselves in two ways: (1) become “fools” in the world's eyes so that true God-like wisdom could be attained, (2) avoid glorying in man, realizing their riches in Christ.

In verse 18, Paul urges the individual reader not to deceive himself. He would be self-deceived by trusting in the wisdom of the world and advancing in it. As proven already, true wisdom is found only in God; thus it is far better to look foolish in the world's eyes and have true wisdom than to appear wise but have no reality. The Christian is one who finds joy in God and His ways and is content to judge everything in light of it. God has already passed judgment upon the philosophers, psychologists, politicians, etc.: He, through their own wisdom, made them appear foolish and has declared their thoughts to be vain.

Thus it is incumbent upon the true believer to avoid boasting in man and his ways. This does not come by negativity, but rather by a positive appreciation of what we have in Christ. Being joint-heirs with Christ, believers possess all things by right. If they possess the world and more, what can mere man and his pathetic ways offer? But the incentive to be thoroughly Godward goes further, for we are Christ's. We are His possession: why would we be focused on the horizontal when the heights of glory mark our very identity? And further, “Christ is God's.” By this clause, we are directed to the height of all purposes: all things summed up in God unto His glory. When these things are realized, the thoughts of the “wise” truly do become vain.

Though it is our natural tendency to be intimidated by academia and Christendom, they really have no advantage over the thoroughly-spiritual Christian who makes no apology for his embrace of God's wisdom. With Christian character, his rule of life is Christ, made possible by the empowering of the Holy Spirit. It is thoroughly of God. With Christian thought, his standard is the mind of Christ brought about by the revelation and illumination of the Spirit. It is thoroughly of God. The moment man in any capacity infringes on God's things, he ruins them. May God ever be our end, our means, and our standard!

Conclusion

In chapter four, Paul begins to affirm his position as apostle, more particularly as a steward of God's mysteries (truth once hidden, but now revealed). He sees the proclamation of Divine wisdom as something for which he is accountable. He feels the weight of his burdens and understands that complete faithfulness is the only adequate response to the possession of Divine truth.

As we enter into the depths of God, let us see faithfulness as a requirement in every study. We are stewards of divine revelation, especially since God has spoken through Christ in these “last days.” Will we be ten-talent stewards or one-talent stewards? Will we bury the truth of God and offer it to Him unappreciated, undeveloped, and misapplied? Or will we buy the truth and allow it to change the essence of who we are? Whatever choice we make, may we never forget, “It is REQUIRED in stewards, that a man be found faithful.”