

# Lessons from Corinth

## Part 1: 1 Cor. 1:1-4:20

July 29, 2013

### How to Use These Studies

Take some time to read through the particular section being written about. Read it over once to get the big picture and a second time to slow down and reflect. When I reference passages, which I will do often, take time to go there in your Bible and read that particular reference. Also, consider following up on the resources I suggest. Of course, pray! Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you – of that I am totally confident!

### The Corinthian Letters

It would be a real understatement to say that Paul's letters are "dense," filled full of truth that can be applied to our lives. The Corinthian letters are certainly so. A N.T. letter (epistle) is *situational*, meaning that it is written to address the particular circumstance of the original group of believers who received it. Corinthians is no exception. Paul addresses specific concerns and issues that have come to his attention through those who have visited him (1 Cor. 1:11) and through a letter written to him from the Corinthians themselves (1 Cor. 7:1). Paul, always the pastor, expresses intense concern for his converts' movement forward in the truth and that they live with integrity toward the gospel.

Understanding Paul's original intention in writing to the Corinthians is the first step for us to understand the Corinthian message applies to us today. So, as we look for "lessons from Corinth," we will begin by briefly looking at the original message in its context before we turn to see how it might apply to us.

### The City of Corinth

Corinth was a cosmopolitan and prosperous 1<sup>st</sup> century city. Gordon Fee comments, "...Paul's Corinth was at once the New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas of the ancient world."<sup>1</sup> Paul's converts, who formed the church there, came from a truly "pagan" background and brought with them into their new found faith a great deal of baggage. Again, Fee, "Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, an inordinate amount of Corinth was yet in them..."<sup>2</sup>

### The Letter We Call "First Corinthians"<sup>3</sup>

In trying to understand Paul's letter, it helps a great deal to see *how* he has put it together as he addresses the situation at Corinth.

- 1 Cor. 1:1-6:20 deals with issues that have come to Paul's attention through "Chloe's people," probably a reference to believers who gathered in Chloe's house.<sup>4</sup>
- In 1 Cor. 7:1-16:11 Paul turns to address issues that have been raised by a letter sent by the Corinthians to Paul; notice the repeated "now concerning" which introduces the various issues. Overall, Paul deals with eleven distinct concerns.

Many commentators see Paul's approach in First Corinthians as a sort of "Paul the Answer Man" who is dealing with various questions arising out the Corinthian believers' confusion or ignorance. Other scholars think that such an understanding of things doesn't take into consideration the difficult kind of relationship Paul has with the Corinthians; in other words, this take on things is too tame.<sup>5</sup> Most likely Paul finds himself at odds with the Corinthians, who have taken exception to Paul and his beliefs; they know what he said to do and they just don't want to do it! Paul's goal, then, is to persuade them that he is correct and they are not. You will notice in reading the letters Paul's repeated pattern of explaining why they are wrong and then giving them a command to act upon.

## **Part One: 1 Cor. 1:1-4:20. “Whose wisdom, anyway?”**

The Corinthians had a fascination with “wisdom.”<sup>6</sup> Now, not the kind of wisdom we might find, say, in the Proverbs of the Bible; rather, the worldly kind of wisdom of the Corinthian culture that surrounded them.

Like fish in a fish bowl, they were unaware of the water in which they were swimming. They had imbibed the ways of thinking of their surrounding culture and had become quite proud of the way they thought. This worldly way thinking had a significant effect on how they understood the gospel. They looked at Jesus, his life, death and resurrection all through the lenses of their cultural “wisdom.” And guess what? They really made a mess of it. Their attachment to this “worldly” wisdom, this way of thinking and believing, had created disunity among them (1:11-12) and an arrogant “know it all” attitude toward Paul and his teaching.<sup>7</sup>

In 1:17-2:5 Paul lets them know how far afield their “wisdom” has taken them. God’s incredible wisdom (in contrast to worldly wisdom) was revealed in the *foolishness* of the cross. After all, what Jew would have thought that the Jewish Messiah would suffer and die? Who among Gentiles would think that a cross; the most despicable and despised way to die in the first century, was the way to salvation (1:17-24)? And yet, “this is what God has done and what God has revealed - and this is my message” says Paul (2:1-5).

There *is* wisdom worth obtaining. God’s wisdom, the wisdom of the cross, revealed to us by the Spirit (2:6-3:4). This is the key passage in Paul’s argument against the Corinthian wisdom. Paul is not talking here about some “deeper” insight for some “super-spiritual” Spirit-filled people (that other Christians have yet to find). Nor is he dealing with “carnal Christians.”<sup>8</sup> Rather, he is dealing with believers who need to radically adjust their perspective according to the Spirit’s direction and leadership. Their insistence on holding to the way the world sees things is hindering their ability to walk in *God’s* ways.

### **Take Away and Application**

We need to be aware that we are constantly bombarded, in a multitude of subtle ways, with thinking and perspectives that are not God’s, not Biblical. We are immersed in them. Unless we become intentional, we will never see what we need to see and never escape. If you are not consciously, deliberately swimming against the cultural current, then you can be sure that you are being swept away with it.

Ideas have consequences; so we are told. What we have thought about in the past makes us what we are in the present; what we choose to do with all of that in the present determines our future. The problem for us, like those believers in Corinth, is that we are surrounded by a world, a “culture” that (increasingly) does not align with Biblical truth. In fact, it is decisively contrary. We may think that this increasing distance between our culture’s ways of thinking and the Bible would make it easier for us to see the difference; perhaps it *should*. However, given the lack of difference in beliefs, values, attitudes and lifestyles *between* professing American Christians and the non-Christian culture, we are either not seeing the difference or we don’t really care. We are captured; *accommodation to* and *adoption of* the changing anti-Biblical cultural norms is the order of the day for even “Bible-believing” Christians.

We adopt these values and attitudes automatically and subtly. *And American Christians are far more shaped by the surrounding culture than they realize; and far more shaped by the culture than the Bible or the Spirit.*<sup>9</sup> Unless there is a conscious and concerted effort on our part to challenge and then adjust our thinking to the Biblical perspective, we will simply continue on

imbibing the non-truth around us and become more and more like it. We are at war for our minds, whether we think so or not.<sup>10</sup>

We cannot take on a more complete discussion of worldview here.<sup>11</sup> So let's get more specific: Where do we see "Corinthian wisdom" today? What are the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalents with which we must wrestle?

Paul helps us by narrowing the focus. For the Corinthians, their worldly wisdom was a way of thinking (and accompanying attitudes) that denied the power and significance of the cross (1 Cor. 1-2). For Paul, this indifference to the cross was the *evidence* that the Corinthians and their wisdom were far astray from the truth of the gospel. Therefore the point of beginning for them (and for us) is to understand God's purpose for us (His wisdom) which is found only in the cross.

The cross. What a slap in the face to worldly ways and wisdom! At the center of the upside down kingdom is the King crucified – what could be more absurd from a worldly perspective?<sup>12</sup> Yet, Paul says *this cross* is the power and the wisdom of God (1:24). God's wisdom, expressed in the cross, is founded squarely on humility; only embracing the cross puts an end to the pride and arrogance of worldly ways and wisdom.

Importantly, it is the cross that reveals the character of God (2:6-9). This self-sacrificing life and love is WHO HE IS (Phil. 2:5-8) and all who would walk with Him must embrace its reality. In other words, until we make a conscious decision to follow Him into His death (dying to ourselves), then we will not understand or embrace the wisdom He offers.

Surprisingly, this cross-way-of-life is the life for which we were created; it means to live in relationship with this kind of God and to be like Him. No wonder Paul tells them to be *imitators* – of Paul, whom they can see, and therefore of Christ, whom they cannot see (4:16, 11:1). Can we say that of our lives?

In 4:6-13, Paul contrasts his way of life, lived as an imitator of Jesus, to their posture and "wisdom." What a contrast! And what an indictment on the American church! We certainly find that we look a lot more like the Corinthians than like Paul (thus Jesus); and worse we, like them, take pride in the fact! Consider, what is considered "success" in the American church? How about in our personal lives? Bigger, more, better. Paul looks rather "foolish" in comparison; yet, his life shames our complacency and love of comfort and ease (4:14-18).

What then is "Corinthian wisdom?" Any way of thinking that encourages us to shrink back from the difficulty, hardship and costliness of the gospel.

Why is it that we don't always immediately recognize the "worldly" in our thinking? Perhaps we don't see it because of how fully invested we are in the world. We hold to its values as our own because we like the perks it offers – the comforts, the affluence, the ease, the complacency; and most importantly we live in the fear that if we let the Spirit loose in our lives we might have to actually give something up, to sacrifice! Perhaps it's time for a little "come to Jesus" session for the American church.

One example will suffice to make the point. I am struck with how indifferent we (I) are to those things that should make our blood curdle. The elephant in the American living room is the unspoken genocide of the unborn. Yet, we (I) seem so little bothered – how can this be so? Because we are filled with Corinthian wisdom; we have accepted the cultural lie and no longer see the elephant. Yet God's heart is breaking and we are searing our already desensitized consciences.

I am struck as well with how “trendy” some American Christians can be in their social concern, for social justice. Many are concerned for the welfare of animals (and we should be) and for the environment (and we should be), but how can these concerns trump the need to protect life in the womb?! We have succumbed to our culture; we are silent when we should scream.<sup>13</sup> To be concerned for animals and the environment, even as these are legitimate concerns, is only to come alongside, to swim in the current of, the prevailing cultural worldview; but to stand for the unborn is to be truly *radical* – it means swimming upstream and against the prevailing “establishment wisdom.” To advocate for the unborn will **cost**.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, like the Corinthians, we need a healthy, deadly dose of the cross.

How do we escape? In embracing the cross we make a conscious decision to yield our lives, moment by moment; letting His life be lived in and through us (Gal. 2:20). How do we do this practically? Only by the Spirit! It is the Spirit that will reveal the power and wisdom of God to us (2:6-16). As we commit ourselves to “walk by the Spirit” and “keep in step with the Spirit,” the Spirit will lead us in God’s way, moment by moment, day by day (Gal. 5:17, 25. Rom. 8:1-14). He will empower us, enable us and equip us for this way of living. And in truth, it is the way of deep joy and abiding significance.

How can we discover how thoroughly we have been immersed, saturated with worldly ways of thinking? It may help to allow the Spirit to do a “reality check,” to let Him expose by comparison the prevailing culture’s value system and our own. How much of what we value is nothing more than an echo of the culture around us? What specifically must change if we adopt His wisdom, His ways and values and put off the worldly ways of thinking that have captured our hearts and minds?<sup>15</sup>

Ask Him for just that.

Part two (1 Cor. 5) to come, what about “judging,” yes or no?

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, 4.

<sup>3</sup> The Corinthian letters are part of an ongoing correspondence between Paul and the believers at Corinth. There are at least four letters and perhaps five (some scholars see 2 Cor. 10-13 as a separate letter); 1 Corinthians is the second letter we know of and 2 Corinthians the fourth (and perhaps fifth). See my “Paul and the Corinthians” for an overview of the correspondence and chronology. At the website: [mikeandanitahuckins.com](http://mikeandanitahuckins.com)

<sup>4</sup> Remember, there were no church buildings. People gathered in homes in small to mid-size groups.

<sup>5</sup> See especially Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*.

<sup>6</sup> Paul uses the Greek word group for wisdom 26 times in chapters 1-3 and then twice more in the book. He then only uses the word group 19 times more in all of his other writings.

<sup>7</sup> The Corinthians were making comparisons, rendering judgment, between Paul, Cephas (Peter) and Apollos (1:11-12). Who was the best speaker, who wowed them with their oratory skills, who was “profound and deep” in their “wisdom”? In the first century, there were traveling orators and “wise men” who liked to show off their oratory skills (and be compensated accordingly). Perhaps this hits home with how *we* evaluate our speaker and teachers.

<sup>8</sup> A common and wrong interpretation. The “natural man” of 2:14 is not an immature believer, rather a *non-believer*. Believers have the Spirit and as “Spirit-people” have access to God’s cross-centered wisdom. Following Gordon Fee, the translation of 1 Cor. 2:10-3:1 could read something like this: 10 “*But we know these things because God has revealed them to us by his Spirit, and his Spirit searches out everything and shows us even God’s deep secrets.* 11 *No one can know what anyone else is really thinking except that person alone, and no one can know God’s thoughts except God’s own Spirit.* 12 *And God has actually given us his Spirit (not the world’s spirit) so we can know the wonderful things God has freely given us.* 13 *When we tell you this, we do not use words of human wisdom. We speak words given to us by the Spirit, using the Spirit’s words to explain the (Spirit’s) truths.* 14 *But people who aren’t Christians can’t understand these truths from God’s Spirit. It all sounds foolish to them because*

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only those who have the Spirit can understand the (things of the Spirit). 15 We who have the Spirit understand these things, but others can't understand us at all. 16 How could they? For, 'Who can know what the Lord is thinking? Who can give him counsel?' But we can understand these things, for we have the mind of Christ. 3:1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to Spirit-people - but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ." (NLT/NASU following Gordon Fee with my editing.)

<sup>9</sup> There is much evidence to show this to be the case; check out The Barna Group's studies of American Christianity.

<sup>10</sup> So says Paul in 2 Cor. 10:2-5. One of our problems is our rather casual approach to all of this. We must be aggressive in challenging and then changing our worldview if we are to ourselves be changed and then be kingdom agents of change.

<sup>11</sup> Worldview is a most important topic. I would recommend a set of little booklets that will help you with understanding worldview and related topics: Scott Allen, Darrow Miller and Bob Moffitt, *God's Unshakeable Kingdom, The Worldview of the Kingdom of God, God's Remarkable Plan for the Nations* and Scott Allen, *Beyond the Sacred-Secular Divide*. They are all available through YWAM Publishing, [www.ywampublishing.com](http://www.ywampublishing.com).

<sup>12</sup> This was certainly true at Corinth where competition and winning were important to their culture; more on this latter. It is important to see that the kingdom of God is "upside down" compared to the world, yet it comes to turn an upside down world right side up! This means that it will always be "counter-cultural" in some important ways.

<sup>13</sup> I do not mean that we should not be broad in our addressing of social concerns, nor that we individually or together might be involved in only one issue; rather that we must have Biblical perspective and proportion. Animals have value, but humans are created in the image of God.

<sup>14</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> century revival in England and in 19<sup>th</sup> century in America led to the abolitionist/anti-slavery movement. It was a costly stand in those days. Find: Rebecca J. Winter, *The Night Cometh* for a look at this.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, this means that we take seriously the development of a Biblical worldview (and work at it) and then applying these truths to our lives and world.