BUILT DIFFERENT

LESSON THREE

COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY NOTES

1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-16

In the *Pillar New Testament Commentary*, Roy Ciampa shows how God's wisdom contrasts with fleshly wisdom.

2:6b The second half of v. 6 underscores the contrast between God's wisdom and the wisdom of the world, which Paul had already stressed in 1:18–25. Here he calls the latter *the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age*. Just as earlier human wisdom is under God's judgment, here the rulers who advocate it likewise will *come to nothing*. 1 Corinthians 1:28 uses the same verb, that is, "to nullify" or "bring to nothing." *The rulers of this age*, like "the things that are," are "doomed to come to nothing" (Thiselton). They have no part in the age to come. The Corinthian Christians are part of and destined for the new age. To embrace human wisdom, then, is bad eschatology, for it is an alignment with a party that God opposes and whose fate is set.

Since in v. 8 "the rulers of this age" are responsible for crucifying Christ, many commentators assume that this phrase refers to evil human rulers. However, the biblical and Jewish apocalyptic background sees evil supernatural figures behind such acts against God, and comparable themes are reflected elsewhere in Paul's letters (e.g., Col. 1:26; 2:2, 15; Eph. 3:10; 6:10–12). Further, *rulers* can mean "evil spirits" in the church fathers and New Testament Apocrypha. While it is true that *rulers* in the plural is not used elsewhere in the New Testament for demons, John 12:31, 14:30, and 16:11 do use the term this way in the singular. 2 Corinthians 4:4 confirms that Paul did think of the progress of the gospel as being opposed on a cosmic level. Thus, with Scroggs and Bruce, it is best to take *the rulers of this age* as a reference both to the world's organized opposition to God's wisdom and to the pernicious spiritual forces behind them.

2:7 Paul explains further that the message of *wisdom* he communicates to, and is received by, discerning believers belongs to God and that its nature is a *hidden mystery* now revealed. Paul's other uses of the term "mystery" in 1 Corinthians 15:51, Romans 16:25–26, Colossians 1:26, and Ephesians 3:5–6 (cf. 1 Pet. 1:12) mark it as new revelation unattainable by human reason that consists of a more detailed unfolding of God's plan and purpose in the gospel. "In Jewish apocalyptic literature mystery (*raz*) has an eschatological meaning. It designates the salvific events to be revealed in the age to come." The revelation of the *mystery* was no accident or afterthought, but foreordained: it was *destined before time began*. Unlike our day, in the ancient world novelty did not impress when it came to the world of ideas. On the contrary, the argument from antiquity, or here, more accurately, eternity, carried enormous weight. Not only for Jews, but also for Greeks and Romans, the more venerable a teaching was, the more credibility it attracted. Paul's point is that *God's wisdom* goes back to the very beginning.

The goal of God's plan was the ultimate good of believers: it was *for our glory*. Instead of sharing the fate of "the rulers of this age," that is, "come to nothing" (2:6b), believers anticipate an altogether better destiny (2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:30; Phil. 3:21). The use of "the Lord of glory" as a title for Christ in v. 9 gives a hint as to the way in which such exaltation is possible; believers expect glory because of their union with the risen and exalted Christ. 1 Corinthians 2:7–8 thus act as a precursor to Paul's argument in chapter 15 where Christ is "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (15:20) and the link between the destiny of Christ and believers is a constant presupposition.

Daniel gives comparable teaching regarding "wisdom in a mystery." When God reveals the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream to Daniel, he responds in a prayer that shares language and ideas similar to those of 1 Corinthians 2:6–8, 10–11. In both passages wisdom (Dan. 2:20, 21, 23; 1 Cor. 2:6) from God is associated with a mystery (Dan. 2:19; 1 Cor. 2:7), and both claim that this mystery reaches to the depths: Daniel 2:22: "he reveals deep and hidden things"; 1 Corinthians 2:10: "the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God."27 The hiddenness of the mystery continues for all except believers—*for our glory* gives the result for believers only.

2:8 The evil forces of darkness, both cosmic and terrestrial, that is, *the rulers of this age*, did not

"understand" God's wisdom. The verb translated *understood* in the TNIV is literally "to know." But as in 1:21, the sense is not that the world did not cognitively grasp the message, but that they did not accept and welcome it personally. Instead they actively opposed the message by crucifying *the Lord of glory*.

This title refers to the grandeur of Christ. It is a qualitative genitive, meaning that he is the Lord who is characterized by glory. The paradoxical notion that the magnificent Lord would be executed in shame sums up the foolishness of God's wisdom in the world's eyes, reminding us of 1:22–23. What is left unsaid is the heart of early Christian preaching, in the words of the apostle Peter, that "he was not abandoned to the grave but God raised him to life and exalted him to the right hand of God" (Acts 2:31–32).

2:9 That Paul is quoting Scripture in 2:9 is suggested by the words, *as it is written*. Nowhere else does he cite anything but the Old Testament using this formula. However, what follows does not match closely any particular text in Greek or Hebrew Bibles. Origen in the third century attributed the quotation to the no-longer-extant *Apocalypse of Elijah*, and a similar quotation turns up in *Gospel of Thomas* 17 as the words of Jesus. In fact, alternative hypotheses include not only that Paul is citing an apocryphal source or Jesus, but also a wisdom tradition and his opponents in Corinth. A range of Old Testament texts have also been proposed as his source. After considering the best candidate for the precursor text to 1 Corinthians 2:9, we will also note an echo of Daniel 2:19–23 in 1 Corinthians 2:6–8, 10–11.

Although we cannot be certain, the suggestion that we are dealing with a loose quotation of Isaiah 64:4 ("from of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you") has much to commend it. Both texts assert that no human being is able to understand the divine revelation without God's enabling. The fact that the references to the ear and eye in Isaiah 64:4 are in reverse order compared to 1 Corinthians 2:9 does not rule out a link between the texts; such alterations were an accepted aspect of citation technique in antiquity.

The Hebrew idiom, "go up onto the heart," which appears in 1 Corinthians 2:9, is not found in Isaiah 64:4 but does occur in the Greek of Isaiah 65:17. This has led some to argue that Paul combines Isaiah 64:4 and Isaiah 65:17 in his citation. However, two differences between Isaiah 65:17 and 1 Corinthians 2:9 weigh against it: whereas the tense of the verb in Isaiah is future, in 1 Corinthians it is aorist; the Isaiah text has "their heart" rather than "the heart of man." Thiselton's conclusion is fair: "The widespread suggestion that Paul combines Isa 64:4 and 65:17, although possible, seems too imprecise for certainty, even if Paul does combine various quotations in a catena or free collection elsewhere (e.g., in Rom. 3:10–18)."

In 2:8–12 Paul discusses the revelation of the wisdom that came to the apostles and prophets through the Holy Spirit. Negatively, it was not known (perceived or grasped) by the rulers of this age (2:8–9). Positively, it was revealed by God through the Spirit to the apostles and prophets who received the Spirit of God (2:10–12).

In its Old Testament context Isaiah 64:4 concerns the uniqueness of God's plan of salvation, which remains hidden. Judgment against God's enemies also appears, as in the plea for divine intervention in 64:1 and the appearance of fire in 64:2 (cf. "to make your name known to your adversaries"). In terms of its early interpretation, a range of Jewish texts associated with Isaiah 64:4 stresses the inability of humanity to understand God's ways and connect it with the stone tradition and the theme of the new creation.

In its new context the text is straightforward with one grammatical exception: semantically, what does the relative pronoun, "*what*," look back to? While Conzelmann is right that the construction is difficult to unravel, Findlay and Ellicott's suggestion makes sense of the connection; *what* looks back to "we speak" in vv. 6–7, giving the sense: "we speak God's wisdom … what no eye has seen…." Thus, in citing this Scripture Paul shows that the wisdom he and other apostles and prophets preach

is nothing less than the fullness of God's plan of salvation. With this citation Paul develops further the apocalyptic dimension of divine wisdom. Those who love God understand his salvation as true wisdom. Having affirmed that Paul does teach wisdom among the mature, Isaiah 64:4 reminds us that we relate to God through love and not primarily through wisdom or knowledge: "*these things God has prepared for those who love him*." Those "in the know" are not there by virtue of their own ingenuity; they receive "*what no human mind has conceived.*" God prepares things beyond human comprehension for those who are his. As Paul will say in v. 16, "the mature" are not those who boast of their superior mind, but rather those who "have the mind of Christ."

2:10 The reason Paul and other Christian teachers can declare God's wisdom, "the things he has prepared" for all believers to receive, even though these things are inaccessible to humans, is that they have been *revealed* to them. The word *for* connects this verse with vv. 6, 7, and 9 and introduces the necessary explanation. The Corinthians may have thought that some of their leaders were more insightful than others, and that this explained their superior wisdom. Paul says no, knowledge of God's plan of salvation comes only *by his Spirit*. The "revelation" to which Paul here refers is not the illumination given to all believers, but the disclosure of God's full purposes in the cross and Christ Jesus to the apostolic preachers, which they in turn pass on to those who love him, with the goal that they might become "mature."

This is only the second reference to the "Spirit" in the book (see 2:4) and it introduces a sustained reflection on the Holy Spirit as the essential source of revelation from God. The word appears six times in five verses (2:10–14). As Thiselton and Collins note, this section establishes a framework for later material on the Holy Spirit in the letter in chapters 12–14 and 15:42–57 (cf. 15:12–28, 38–41). Paul's point in all these passages is that "the work of the Spirit remains inseparable from the work of God as revealed in Christ." Thus, as we will see in later verses, to be "spiritual" is not to have some extra light from within or even somehow to be extraordinarily sensitive to the divine, as in much popular use of the term, but to appropriate and live in accordance with God's saving work through Christ by God's Spirit.

A second "for," not translated by TNIV, introduces Paul's explanation as to why this "revelation" by God's Spirit is necessary: "For" *the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. The Spirit of God* "searches out" (Barrett) "the depths of God's purposes" (TEV) rather than "the depths of God's nature" (NEB) or "the depths of God's own self" (Thiselton). The phrase refers to the hidden but now disclosed plan of salvation to which Paul has referred in vv. 7–9. It is not that we do not learn about God through hearing of his plan, but the focus of "God's wisdom" throughout the passage is not his character and attributes in the direct sense, but rather the salvation which he bestows.

The Greek is literally "the depths of God" (NJB, NIV, NRSV), a phrase found in Jewish apocalyptic literature (e.g., 1 Enoch 63:3; 2 Baruch 14:8–9; Testament of Job 37:6; 1QS xi 18–19). Using the plural, "depths," intensifies the reference. The Spirit has free and full access to this knowledge, and thereby is able to reveal it to the apostolic preachers, who then declare God's wisdom to the mature. This wisdom is not attainable by human beings without the aid of God's Spirit, a point Paul emphasizes throughout the paragraph and explains further in v. 11. Several terms make this point: it is "hidden" and cannot be found, and it is a "mystery" which cannot be solved (2:6–7), reaching to the very "depths of God" (2:10). Once again, the implication of what Paul is saying deals a blow to human pride and underscores "awe and wonder at God's free choice to bestow such favor."

2:11 Paul supplies a cogent explanation, with a third use of the word *for*, as to how the Spirit of God is qualified to be the agent of revelation to the apostolic group. The type of argument he employs is the logic of minor to major. Just as a person's own spirit has exclusive access to their private thoughts, so it is with *the Spirit of God* and *the thoughts of God*. Only God's Spirit is privy to the profound plan of salvation which has been revealed to the apostles. The *thoughts of God* is literally "the things of God" (AV/KJV). It is a parallel expression to "the depths of God" (v. 10). Again, it is better not to take it primarily as a reference to "what God is" (REB) or "the qualities of God" (NJB), but to "what is truly God's" (NRSV) or, as in TNIV, to "God's thoughts" which are revealed by his Spirit concerning the plan of salvation.

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Romans 11:33 is a helpful parallel which also uses the word "depth" and emphasizes that God's "wisdom" is beyond human ken: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" In context, the "riches" to which Paul refers are the question of "the kindness and sternness of God" (Rom. 11:22) in the "mystery" (Rom. 11:25) of his dealings with Israel and the Gentiles in the gospel. Paul goes on to ask rhetorically in Romans 11:34a, "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" a question he also asks in 1 Corinthians 2:15. In connection with our own passage, Paul humbly confesses in 1 Corinthians 2:9 that "no human mind has conceived [of God's wisdom]," before going on to trumpet the grace of God with the stunning affirmation: in the face of our inability to find God, "we have the mind of Christ."

In a world where the search for God is a given, the last clause of this verse is deeply pessimistic and unnerving: *No one knows the thoughts of God*. As Gooch states, "Paul draws a thick and heavy line between things human and divine and places the things of God squarely outside the limits of human knowing." When Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus didn't compliment him on his ingenuity, but explained: "this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven" (Matt. 16:16–17). Notions that we can find God through reason or intuition are cruel and misleading. No sentence in the Bible underscores more emphatically the necessity of divine revelation. In the words of Karl Barth, "God is known through God alone."

2:12 Having struck such a negative note on the score of knowing "the thoughts of God," Paul contrasts the lot of all believers, those who have the Spirit of God, with those who do not: but *we have not received the spirit of this world but the Spirit who is from God*. The appearance of *we* raises again the question of to whom Paul is referring with this pronoun. To recap, we took "we" in vv. 6 and 7 and "us" in v. 10 to refer to the apostolic preachers (cf. Eph. 3:5–6) and "those who love him" in v. 9 as all believers. The first-person plural pronoun appears again in vv. 12, 13, and 16, and the commentaries are divided (or silent) over precisely whom Paul has in mind on each occasion. The best solution seems to be to understand "we" in v. 13 as another reference to the apostles and prophets/preachers; the same verb "to speak" is used as in vv. 6 and 7. However, "we" in v. 12 is almost certainly a reference to all believers, since Paul regularly defines Christian identity in terms of those who have "received" the "Spirit" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 3:2; 2 Cor. 11:4). Likewise, *us* in v. 12 refers inclusively to all Christians, with *what God has freely given us* pointing back to "God's wisdom" (vv. 6–7), "the things God has prepared for those who love him" (v. 9). The climactic "we have the mind of Christ" in v. 16 is another reference to all believers, to "those who have the Spirit" (v. 15). In other words, there is an interplay of message/messenger and response throughout the passage.

The spirit of the world, whom believers *have not received*, could be a reference to Satan, the spirit who leads people to oppose God (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 6:11; John 12:31). In that case, it would reinforce the reference to "the rulers of this age" in vv. 6 and 7 as evil supernatural figures. However, since we rejected such a narrow interpretation in vv. 6 and 7, which is better understood as a reference both to the world's human opposition to God's wisdom and to the pernicious spiritual forces behind them, it is more likely here that the spirit of the world in v. 12 refers to the spirit of human wisdom that opposes God. Other references to "the world" in 1:20, 21, 27, and 28 support this identification. Paul draws the lines starkly: either you have a spirit which is oriented toward human pride and wisdom, that is, eloquence and reason independent of God, or you have God's Spirit.

The purpose of receiving the Spirit who is from God, a phrase emphasizing his very different origin from that of *the spirit of the world*, is that we as believers might "know" the things that *God has freely given us*. The same verb "to know" is used as in v. 11a; believers now "know" the gift of salvation in Christ in the same direct and immediate sense as someone "knows" their private thoughts; such is their confidence and assurance. No wonder that in v. 7 Paul labeled the reception of "God's wisdom" glorious. If we were to ask for a list of the benefits of God's beneficence to which Paul is pointing in v. 12b, Godet believes that 1:30 is a good summary: "Christ Jesus," our "wisdom from God," namely, "righteousness, sanctification and redemption." *What God has freely given us* is salvation, a new state and status before God.

2:13 In the introduction to this section we argued that the theme of 2:6–16 is "we speak a message of

wisdom among the mature" (2:6a). If 2:6b–12 expounds the source and revelation of God's "wisdom," v. 13 focuses on the apostolic activity of "speaking" this message. Paul explains first, negatively, that the communication of this wisdom is not with words from human wisdom (2:13a), and second, positively, that rather it is with words from the Spirit (2:13b).

The apostles and prophets/preachers *speak* "what God has freely given" all believers (2:12b), namely, the full wisdom of God expressed in Christ crucified, *in words not taught by human wisdom*. That such preachers communicate God's wisdom not in words judged by human standards to be wise, "in learned discourse" (Héring), recalls Paul argument in 1:18–2:5. As Paul says in 2:4, "my message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words" (cf. 1:17–18). Since in 2:6–3:5 Paul is giving a positive take on the wisdom of the cross and the Spirit, in 2:13 a negative reference to "wisdom" has to be qualified as "human wisdom" to avoid the possible misunderstanding that he is talking about God's wisdom. Another difference is that the expression in 2:13, *words taught by human wisdom*, refers not so much to the style of delivery, the emphasis of 1:17–18 and 2:4, but to the source of the content of the message. The apostolic band *speaks words taught by the Spirit*, which is not surprising given Paul's insistence that the "thoughts of God" can be accessed only by his Spirit (v. 11).

The concluding clause in v. 13 is difficult to translate. The main issues to be resolved are whether the participle *explaining* means "interpreting," "comparing," or "combining," and whether the word "spiritual"57 (TNIV, *Spirit-taught words*) is neuter (spiritual things) or masculine (spiritual people). Robertson and Plummer lay out the main options. The first two take the substantival adjective as neuter, the last two as masculine. Either the apostolic preachers: (1) combine spiritual things (words) with spiritual things (subject matter); (2) interpret or explain spiritual truth in spiritual language; (3) match (or combine) spiritual matters to spiritual hearers; or (4) interpret spiritual truths to spiritual hearers. In terms of the teaching of the unit overall, the differences are only a matter of nuance. Leaving aside 2:13b, 1 Corinthians 2:6–16 affirms elsewhere that the source of the message Paul speaks is wisdom from God in words of the Spirit to those who are spiritual. Adjudicating between the four alternative interpretations is quite difficult. Paul uses "spiritual" as both a neuter (cf. 1 Cor. 9:11; 10:4; 12:1; 14:1; 15:44) and as a masculine (cf. 1 Cor. 2:15; 3:1; 14:37; cf. Gal. 6:1; Eph. 6:12) substantival adjective. And the verb "to explain" means "to compare" in 2 Corinthians 10:12, "to combine" in general classical usage, and "to interpret" in various LXX texts. Since the lexical data are not decisive, the most plausible rendering depends on the flow of Paul's argument.

While TNIV's *explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words* (a variation of view 2 above) is possible, the fourth view seems to fit best. The references to "the spiritual" which immediately follow 2:13 are masculine, translated as "the person with the Spirit" in 2:15 and "spiritual" (persons) in 3:1. The verb in question is used in the LXX to mean "interpret" (Gen. 40:8, 22; 41:12; Judg. 7:15; Dan. 5:8, 12; cf. Joseph and Aseneth 4:10) in the sense of unlocking spiritual truth revealed by God to another person. The objection that the Old Testament references almost all refer to interpreting dreams misses the point; the common element both in the Old Testament and in 1 Corinthians is the presence of inaccessible revelation from God that requires explanation, in the Old Testament a dream, in 1 Corinthians "hidden wisdom." Thus, in 2:13b Paul is probably saying that the apostolic preachers speak the message in *words taught by the Spirit* by "interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual" (NRSV).

But who are "those who are spiritual"? An identification cannot be made without also defining "the person without the Spirit" (2:14), "the worldly" (3:1, 3), and "infants in Christ" (3:1).

2:14 With 2:14–3:4 Paul completes his reflections on his statement in 2:6a: "but (in contrast to human wisdom) we (Paul and the apostles, prophets/preachers in Corinth) speak (or declare) wisdom (the fullness of the gospel of Christ crucified) among *the mature* (discerning, experienced Christians)." Having pondered God's "wisdom" in 2:6b–12 and the nature of its communication by the apostolic band in 2:13, Paul turns to explain what he means by "we speak wisdom among the mature." The thrust of Paul's remarks is that he wants all of the Corinthians to be "taken forward to maturity" (Heb. 6:1).

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The main challenge of interpretation in these verses is working out "who's who." In talking to the Corinthians about "maturity" Paul refers to a further five groups: (1) "those who are spiritual" in 2:13, 15 and 3:1; (2) "the person without the Spirit" (TNIV) or "the unspiritual man" (RSV; NRSV: "those who are unspiritual"), literally "the natural man" (NASB) in 2:14; (3) the "worldly" (TNIV), "men of the flesh" (RSV), or the "carnal" (NASB) in 3:1; (4) "infants in Christ" in 3:1; and (5) "the worldly" in 3:3 (using a slightly different Greek word from the one in 3:1). A satisfactory exposition depends on defining these terms clearly. A preview of the section's main characters is a helpful orientation to the passage. "Those who are spiritual" is a reference to all believers; if not all Christians are "mature," all have the conditions for such growth, thanks to the Spirit. "The person without the Spirit" refers to non-Christians. "The worldly" in 3:1 refers to those made of "flesh," who are part and parcel of fallen humanity from Adam and so vulnerable to sin. "Infants in Christ" are new Christians, those who have the Spirit and thus a capacity for welcoming spiritual truth and experiencing growth but as yet limited experience of it. And "the worldly" in 3:3 are those who belong to the "flesh," that is, people who are not only part and parcel of fallen humanity but also continue to live according to its ways.

In v. 14, Paul puts the spiritual person side by side with the natural person: But, in contrast to those who are spiritual, the natural person (i.e., *the person without the Spirit*) does not welcome (an understatement explained by the remainder of v. 14) *the things that come from the Spirit of God* (i.e., God's full wisdom in planning and providing redemption through Christ crucified and its implications for living). The reason for this rejection is that such a person judges this message to be *foolishness*. *The person without the Spirit* is volitionally prejudiced against it, and rejects it in unbelief. In fact, in as negative a statement as you can find in Paul's letters about the human condition outside of Christ, he says that the person left to their own "natural" devices "is not able to know them," that is, to respond positively to the things of the Spirit.68 In this regard, the "natural person," someone belonging to this age and not the age to come, resembles "the rulers of this age," who in 2:8 also failed to "know" or "understand" the cross. The reason for this inability is that *the things that* come from the Spirit *of God* are *discerned* or "inquired into" only by the aid of the Holy Spirit, whom "the natural person" does not have. The word Paul uses means only "examine" when used of people (as the direct object), but means "inquire into" or "ask questions about" when used with impersonal objects. In this context (2:9–16) Paul speaks of people's ability (or lack of ability) to understand, comprehend, or know God's thoughts. In 2:10 he says that the Spirit "makes a careful or thorough effort to learn" all things, even the depths of God. It is the Spirit who knows God's thoughts (v. 11) and who was given to believers so that they might know the things God has freely given them (v. 12), things that can be known only by those who have the mind of Christ (v. 16). In light of the context and the use of the Greek verb in question, it seems Paul's idea is that the Spirit serves as a special resource to believers, who may take their questions and concerns to God. The "spiritual person" is in a position to inquire into all things and find prophetic insight from God in connection with the wisdom of the cross.

On the other hand, *the person without the Spirit of God* is like a child incapable of communicating with a parent, unable to understand the parent's mind or intentions. "The natural" person, then, is the person who belongs exclusively to the realm of their natural life and heritage from Adam, a "mere human being" (3:4). They "do not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God" (Rom. 1:28a). Jude 19 describes the possible effect of such people in the church: "These are people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit." Nonetheless, Paul's purpose is not to accuse the Corinthians of not having the Spirit, but, as will emerge in 3:1–4, as living as if they do not have the Spirit.

2:15 Before accusing the Corinthians of worldly conduct in 3:1–4, Paul must explain further what he means by "spirituality." In contrast to the undiscerning "person without the Spirit" (v. 14), "the spiritual person" *makes judgments about* (or, rather, "inquires into," the same verb as in v. 14) *all things*. In context, the *all things* that those who are spiritual inquire into are God's ways that were formerly hidden. Unlike the natural person, the person with the Spirit is able to bring his or her questions and challenges to God by the Spirit and discover how the wisdom of the cross applies to his/her situation. Verse 15a is thus v. 14b in reverse.

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Those who are spiritual, Paul says, are *not subject to merely human judgments*. The verb in question is repeated for the third time in two verses, but this third time Paul plays on the difference between the meanings of the verb with personal and impersonal object ("to examine or interrogate" versus "to inquire into"). The spiritual person is not ultimately subject to merely human judgments since, as the end of v. 14 indicates, spiritual things (and spiritual people) are understood only via the Spirit, which the things/people of the world lack. Verse 15b is not Paul's exempting those who are spiritual from being examined by others but a way of reinforcing the argument of 1:18–2:5. Paul is placing "the spiritual" beyond the reach of the assessments of "the wisdom of the world" (1:20). The Corinthians had been examining Paul using such measures, and many of them found him wanting. Those who are spiritual are not examined by the world's false wisdom.

2:16 Having declared that the apostles' band and those who are spiritual have received God's wisdom by the Spirit of God (2:10–11), Paul then explains the relationship the Spirit has to him and to others in 2:12–3:4. In 2:16 he quotes a question from Isaiah 40:13, "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" Paul's unexpected answer in the same verse is that "we have the mind of Christ."

Paul's discussion of wisdom in 2:6–16 is not philosophical but apocalyptic in character. Derived from Old Testament and Jewish traditions, and in keeping with his use of other Old Testament texts elsewhere in chapters 1–4, Paul speaks of "this age," a "hidden mystery" "decreed before the ages," and a "glory" that is "revealed." As Hays notes, "Paul was trying to remake the minds of his readers by teaching them to interpret their lives in light of an eschatologically interpreted Scripture." His quotation of Isaiah 40:13 is another link in the chain of this strategy.

One of several rhetorical questions in 40:12–14, Isaiah 40:13 expects the answer, "No one." Isaiah 40:15–17 stresses further the gulf between humans and God: even "the nations are like a drop in the bucket." In context, the "spirit of the Lord" which no one can know is God's plan of salvation (Isa. 11:2; 40:7; 59:19; 63:14). Likewise, no one is qualified to be God's "counselor" (Isa. 11:2; 19:3; 30:1). Isaiah 40 itself concerns God's intention to deliver his people, as 40:1–11 indicate. As Williams observes, 40:13a could be paraphrased, "Who is able to comprehend the salvific plan of God?" Another dimension to the "spirit of the Lord" in Isaiah is its association with the figure of the servant who acts as God's agent in salvation (42:1; 48:16; 61:1; 63:10).

The use of the text in early Jewish literature anticipates Paul's use in a number of ways. The Spirit of the Lord is connected with the mind of the Lord not only in the LXX but also in Wisdom of Solomon 9:13, 17. Furthermore, the link to God's plan of salvation is clear in various texts from Qumran which emphasize human inability to grasp God's spirit, mind, and ways. Other texts indicate that there is a group, effectively a remnant, who due to divine intervention do indeed grasp his plan of deliverance (e.g., Qumran, 2 Baruch, 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra). All of this makes Paul's choice of the text from Isaiah 40 apt indeed.

Introduced with the conjunction "for," the question and answer conclude 2:12–16 on a positive note. That the citation leads into 3:1–4 is indicated by the words "and I" at the beginning of 3:1. Paul's use of the Isaiah text clarifies a number of puzzling features of the passage. Paul's audacious claim that we have the mind of Christ represents a biting, ironic twist against the Corinthian elitists. His identification of Christ with the "spirit"/"mind" of Isaiah 40:13 is explicable in the light of its connection in Isaiah with the servant. Paul is not asserting his possession of a spiritual insight above his fellow Christians. The wisdom of which he speaks is not exclusive or esoteric but nothing more or less than the fullness of the message of the cross and the salvation it wrought, which, though available to all Christians, needs to be appropriated in order to deal with "fleshly" behavior like the divisiveness, immorality, and idolatry which are plaguing the church in Corinth.

The disjunction between the time of Isaiah and Paul is underscored in the stunning final assertion of v. 16b. "*Who has known the mind of the Lord?*" The anticipated answer is, "No one." Yet Paul follows the question with the answer, *But we have the mind of Christ*. *Mind* here is "not an instrument of thought" but "a mode of thought" or "mind-set." The *mind of Christ*, then, is God's profound wisdom regarding

salvation through a crucified Messiah which was hidden but is now revealed by the Holy Spirit. In keeping with earlier uses of the first-person plural pronoun in such statements, we here does refer to the apostles specifically, but also to others who are spiritual, for they receive the message of God's wisdom (2:6).

The change from "Lord" to "Christ" is a subtle indication that Paul sees himself and the Corinthians living in the messianic age of fulfillment. As Jewett puts it, "the change of expression from 'Lord' in 16a to 'Christ' in 16b binds the true divine wisdom to the crucified Christ." The Spirit does not impart wisdom out of thin air, for the Spirit and the cross go together. The mind of Christ is not exercised by thinking about nothing. Rather, those who are spiritual habitually turn to the cross (2:8), as Paul did in the face of divisions in Corinth in 1:18–2:5. For the cross is where we find Christ's mind-set on such behavior.[1]

1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-17

Thomas Schreiner, in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, remarks on Paul's admonition concerning the divisions in their church:

1. Paul has just explained that those who have the Spirit are able to assess reality since the Spirit has revealed the truths about God to them. Believers enjoy divine wisdom since they are people of the Spirit. Still, things are more complex than they seem, for Paul complains that he could not speak to the Corinthians as 'spiritual people' (*pneumatikois*; csb). The niv's *as people who live by the Spirit* removes the shock of what Paul says, for he states that he could not speak to them as if they were Christians; instead, he had to speak to them as if they were *still worldly*—that is, as if they were those of the flesh (*sarkinois*). According to Paul, those who are fleshly are unbelievers, and a person of the Spirit is, by definition, a Christian (Rom. 8:9). So Paul astonishes the Corinthians by saying that he could not address them as if they were Christians. He softens his attack in the last phrase by saying that they are *mere infants in Christ*, which acknowledges that they do belong to Christ. Since Paul shocks the Corinthians by calling them *worldly* or fleshly, the category here should not be reified as if one can live as a 'carnal Christian'—a worldly Christian—all one's life. The Corinthians were in an unstable position; they were in no man's land; and if they did not repent they would be in danger of eschatological judgment (cf. 10:1–12). We see here that the rhetorical character of what Paul says must be taken into account in understanding his intention.

2. Since the Corinthians were spiritual infants, Paul fed them with *milk* instead of *solid food*. We know the Corinthians were proud of their wisdom; thus Paul's rebuke must have cut deeply when he said they were not able to digest solid food when he first ministered to them. Paul goes even further: they are still not able to handle anything but milk. It is difficult to know what Paul means by milk and solid food. If Paul is thinking of the content of his teaching, his point would be that he gave them the basics of Christian teaching. We find something similar in Hebrews where the author refers to 'elementary truths of God's word' (Heb. 5:12) and says that those who drink 'milk' are infants who are 'not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness' (Heb. 5:13). On the other hand, 'solid food is for the mature' (Heb. 5:14). The author desires to move beyond 'elementary teachings', which focus on repentance and faith, washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection and the final judgment (Heb. 6:1–2). The parallels are striking, and it would seem that *milk* in 1 Corinthians denotes elementary teachings about the gospel. Others say that the content of the teaching does not change; Paul always proclaims Jesus Christ as the crucified one (1 Cor. 2:2) and the forgiveness of sins through his death and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1–4). Those who drink milk, however, are not able to digest what Paul teaches as solid food. On this view, *milk* does not denote the content of the teaching but the receptiveness of the hearers. Deciding between these two options is not easy, but perhaps the second one in this context is closer to the mark, since preaching Christ crucified and risen cannot be relegated to mere milk.

[1] Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 125–139.

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3–4. The omission of the opening 'for' (*gar*) in the niv is unfortunate, since Paul explains here why in verse 2 he said that the Corinthians were still not able to digest solid food. They were *still worldly*—that is, they were still 'fleshly' ('still of the flesh', esv). The word used here is *sarkikoi* ('belonging to the flesh'), while in verse 1 we had the word *sarkinois* ('made of the flesh'). In this context, the words are probably used synonymously. The Corinthians are unable to go deeper because of their worldliness, which is evidenced by their *jealousy and quarrelling* (cf. Rom. 13:13; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:19–20; Jas 3:14). Such strife indicates that they were living at a merely human level instead of according to the Spirit. As noted in 1 Corinthians 1:11–12, the quarrelling and jealousy centred on strife over Paul and Apollos. The Corinthians measured their spiritual wisdom by siding with Paul or Apollos and perhaps Peter as well. The Corinthians believed their partisanship reflected their spiritual perception, but Paul says that it points to their spiritual poverty; they are actually living on a human level instead of relying on the Holy Spirit.

5–6. Paul provides the Corinthians with the proper perspective on ministers like himself and Apollos: they are *servants* (*diakonoi*; cf. 2 Cor. 3:6) whom the Lord employed to bring the Corinthians to belief. They were the vehicle for the faith of the Corinthians, but their effectiveness was not inherent to themselves but owing to the Lord's work in their lives. The task given to Paul and Apollos stemmed from the Lord himself; hence it is the Lord's work, not the work of ministers, that should be featured.

Even though any profit from ministry is ascribed to the Lord, it does not follow that the work of Paul and Apollos was uniform. The diversity of ministries does not contradict but accords with the Lord's work in Paul and Apollos. The growth in ministries comes from God, though the particular ministries exercised by Paul and Apollos were distinct. The church is portrayed here as a field; Paul, by establishing the church, planted the field, and Apollos helped build up the church by watering and nurturing what was previously planted.

7. Paul draws a conclusion from verses 5–6 (*hoste*, So or 'So then', csb): those who plant or establish churches and those who water or nurture them are nothing. Those who establish or strengthen churches are not denigrated here, as if Paul dismisses the labour and effort of those who pour themselves into the lives of others. The issue here is the source of growth; it stems, not from human beings, but only from God. God alone deserves the credit for any benefit which results from ministry; thus there is no reason for ministers to boast about their work, nor is there any basis for others (like the Corinthians) to put their confidence in ministers.

8. Paul now corrects a possible misreading of the previous verses. Those who establish churches and those who nurture them have one fundamental *purpose*: in their labour and ministries they are serving the Lord while endeavouring to carry out his will. Even though all growth comes from God, the work of ministers is not negligible or considered to be meaningless or insignificant. The *labour* of ministers, the quality of work exercised, will be assessed by God and rewarded accordingly. Saying that all growth is ascribed to God does not imply that there is no responsibility for ministry; God will evaluate the quality of work and apportion rewards accordingly.

9. The work is ultimately God's, and yet ministers like Paul and Apollos are *co-workers* who belong to God. God grants blessing, so conversion or spiritual growth comes from him, and yet co-workers are the means by which the growth which stems from God becomes a reality. It follows, then, that the work of co-workers is significant, though, ultimately, all fruit from ministry, all the positive effects from a ministry, are ascribed to God's grace. Indeed, the church does not belong to Paul or Apollos or any other minister. The church is *God's field*, and Paul 'planted' that field, while Apollos 'watered' it (3:6). Paul changes the illustration and identifies the Corinthians as *God's building* (*oikodome*). The word building here signifies that the church is God's temple, and the shift from an agricultural (field) to an architectural (building) metaphor prepares the way for the following verses (3:10–17) in which Paul reflects on the church as God's temple.

10. In verse 6 Paul used the metaphor of planting a field in describing the founding of the church. Here the metaphor shifts to architecture, and Paul portrays his work in establishing the church as

laying a foundation; thus the notion that the church is God's temple is suggested. Paul does not bestow credit on himself, for he notes that the church was founded by God's grace. In going on to say that one must take care how one builds on the foundation, Paul implies that the foundation was properly laid by him as an apostle. Hence, those who build further upon the foundation must ensure that their work fits with the foundation laid so that their work does not compromise or threaten the foundation. Earlier, Apollos's role as one who watered what had already been planted was noted (3:6), but here Apollos drops out because Paul does not want to give any suggestion that he is criticizing Apollos's ministry. Instead, he gives a general admonition which applies to all ministers: they must be careful about how they build on the foundation of the gospel in God's temple, which is the church of Jesus Christ.

11. Paul pauses to explain the nature of the foundation of the church. The foundation is *Jesus Christ* himself, and no other foundation can be laid for the church. What Paul means by the *foundation* is clear from 1:18–2:5 where he clarified that Christ crucified constitutes the baseline of his gospel. Looking ahead, we see this same foundation in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4: Christ crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins. Paul had already laid that foundation in the church, and no-one could lay another foundation, for if a community is not established on the basis of the gospel, the community is not a church at all. The only true basis for a church is the gospel of Christ.

12–13. Paul proceeds to use an illustration of what it means to build upon the foundation. As it is an illustration, he is not literally thinking about how temples were built. In verse 12 he considers the materials that might be used to build upon the foundation. The list is split into two categories: *gold, silver* and *costly stones*, on the one hand, and *wood, hay* or *straw,* on the other hand. The former category represents materials which are useful and beneficial in erecting a structure on the foundation of God's temple, whereas the latter signifies materials that are useless and which will eventually be destroyed if they are part of the superstructure of the temple. We see in Revelation 21:18–21 the description of God's temple as made of beautiful stones and other materials (cf. Exod. 28:17–20; 1 Kgs 5:17; 6:20–21; 1 Chr. 29:2; Isa. 54:11–12; Ezek. 28:13).

The materials described represent the work of ministers as they build upon the foundation of God's temple. The work each one does will become clear on the final day, the day of the Lord. The day will come with fire (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10), and the quality of each person's work will be assessed. The *gold*, *silver* and *costly stones* will endure the fire, showing that the ministry work was of high quality, whereas *wood, hay* or *straw* will be burnt up, and thus the ministries of those who build with *wood, hay* or *straw* will be destroyed.

14–15. In the subsequent verses (3:14–17) three different kinds of work are considered, and the language is reminiscent of Malachi 3:1–5. Malachi envisions a day when the Lord will come to his temple and will refine and purify those who belong to him. Those who do what is right will be rewarded, but those who practise evil will be judged. Paul begins with those whose work endures the fire on the last day (see also Num. 31:23; Isa. 43:2; Zech. 13:9). Such ministers have built with 'gold, silver [and] costly stones'. Since they have done quality work in building the superstructure of God's temple, they will be rewarded. Paul does not tell us what the reward will be. Possibly it is the satisfaction and joy of seeing the fruit of their ministry on the final day. Such a reading fits with what Paul says elsewhere: 'For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy' (1 Thess. 2:19–20; cf. Phil. 2:16; 4:1; 2 Cor. 1:14).

On the other hand, those who build on the foundation with 'wood, hay or straw' will find that their work is consumed by flames. It is difficult to know for certain what Paul has in mind; perhaps he considers teaching and ministry which is off-centre, which does not teach clearly that Jesus is the crucified Messiah and yet does not depart from the gospel entirely. Hence the work of the ministry does not last, since it strays from the centre of the gospel. Still, the ministers *will be saved*. Even though their ministries are significantly flawed, they themselves will not be destroyed on the day of the Lord. Their escape, however, will be like that of one who flees a burning house (cf. Amos 4:11;

Zech. 3:2). These ministers are saved since they genuinely put their faith in Jesus as the crucified and risen Lord, but the flaws in their ministries will be exposed. Some have seen a reference to purgatory here, but that view is excluded since Paul refers to the second coming and the final judgment, not to a judgment between death and the final judgment.

16. The sacredness of ministry is evident in that the church is *God's temple* (*naos*). The context indicates that Paul is not referring to believers individually but to the church corporately. The reference to the church as the temple of God fits with the architectural metaphor which introduces this paragraph. Just as Yahweh resided in the temple under the old covenant and in Israel (Exod. 25:8; 29:45; Lev. 26:11–12; Ps. 114:2), so now *God's Spirit* dwells in the new temple, the church of Jesus Christ. Paul also emphasizes that the church is the temple in Ephesians 2:19–22 (see also 2 Cor. 6:16). There Jesus is described as 'the cornerstone', and the church as growing as a 'holy temple' which is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. In 1 Peter 2:5 the church is a 'spiritual house' where believers offer 'spiritual sacrifices' to God. As in Ephesians, Jesus is again described as 'the cornerstone' of the temple (1 Pet. 2:7).

17. Now we come to the third kind of minister. The first serves well and receives a reward (3:14), whereas the second is saved but ministers poorly; hence the work is burned up (3:15). The third person *destroys God's temple*, which means that the gospel of Jesus Christ is repudiated and, as a consequence, a church is ruined. Such an interpretation, incidentally, does not contradict the claim in Matthew 16:18 that 'the gates of Hades' will not triumph over the church, for Jesus speaks of the church in its entirety. He is not claiming that every local church will continue to be faithful until the end of history. The notion of God's temple being desecrated and ruined reaches back to the Old Testament, where such a sentiment is voiced quite often (cf. Ps. 79:1; Isa. 64:11; Ezek. 23:29).

Those who destroy (*phtheirei*) the church, which is God's holy temple, will themselves be destroyed (*phtheirei*). The idea is rather similar to the ban (hērem) in the Old Testament (cf. Exod. 22:19; Lev. 27:28; Deut. 7:26; Josh. 6:17; 7:11, 25). Achan is destroyed in Joshua 7 since he took what was devoted to the Lord, what was under the ban. In the same way, those who destroy the church ruin what is holy, what is consecrated to God. Those who touch and deface what is holy will be placed under the ban themselves. Like Achan, they will be destroyed by God.[2]

1 CORINTHIANS 3:18-23

In the *NICNT*, Gordon Fee explains Paul's conclusion of the matter: looks at the divisions impacting the church at Corinth.

Paul now gathers up the various threads of the argument to this point and brings it to a preliminary conclusion, a conclusion which makes certain that the long argument with which all this began (1:18–3:4) was not some mere sermonic or rhetorical aside, but rather spoke to the root of the problem of their strife. The paragraph is in two parts (vv. 18–20, 21–23), each marked in the Greek text by an identical opening exhortation ("Let no one …"), and each thereby bringing closure to the first two parts of the problem (*quarreling* in the name of their leaders, but doing so under the guise of *wisdom*).

First he urges that none of them be deceived by what appears to be wisdom but is not. Their *sophia* belongs only to the present age and has no standing whatsoever with the God whom they serve; indeed, it is foolishness to God. All of this recalls and applies the argument that began all of this (1:18–2:16). This motif in turn is tied to the theme of "boasting" in mere humans, thus picking up the problem of the strife itself, especially as it has been carried on in the name of their various leaders. This also recalls Paul's initial response to the problem (3:5–9), which pointed out the folly of following mere humans, "servants of the farm," as it were.

[2] Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 87–94.

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As the reason why they must not "boast" in their teachers, Paul turns their slogans end for end. It is not that the Corinthians belong to Apollos or Paul, but that Paul and Apollos—and everything else—belong to the Corinthians; indeed, all things are theirs because they belong to Christ, and Christ is of God. Thus the main point of the preceding argument (3:5–17) is restated with breathtaking crescendo.

18 Following hard on the heels of the preceding severe warning, Paul exhorts: "Do not deceive yourselves" ("delude," NAB). Those who persist in pursuing *sophia*, who are thereby destroying, not building, the church, are self-deceived—and a fearful judgment threatens them (God will destroy the one who destroys God's temple, the church in Corinth [v. 17]). Paul's point is that the Corinthians' present course is nothing but deception, deception of the highest order, and thus leads ultimately to destruction. Hence he urges them to abandon it in favor of one that brings them back to God's folly, the way of the cross, of a *crucified Messiah*—which is true wisdom. What follows (vv. 18b–20) spells out this concern by recapitulating the basic paradoxes with which all of this began (1:18–2:16).

The opening salvo is irony once again: "If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age." Of course they do; that is quite the point. This same formula will appear three more times in this letter, two of which (8:2; 14:37), along with this one, speak to the heart of the attitudinal issues that plague the church. They think of themselves as wise, as having arrived at knowledge (8:2), and as being spiritual (14:37). That is precisely their problem. And in each case Paul must disabuse them of such opinions; otherwise the church is up for grabs.

This passage helps to bolster the conviction that much of the language of the argument is theirs, but that it is picked up by Paul and used against them. They think of themselves as the "wise." But for Paul such wisdom is strictly "according to the standards of this age." Paul is an eschatological man, and this age is under God's judgment and on its way out (cf. 1:20, 27–29; 2:6, 8). In the cross and resurrection of Christ, God has "befooled" human wisdom. Everything is end for end: wisdom is folly, folly is wisdom; weakness is power; leaders are servants; God's people are nobodies, yet possess all things (vv. 22–23; 2 Cor. 6:9–10). Not everything that has been so reversed is now plainly visible; but the cross and resurrection are evidence of its certainty. Therefore, God's people must abandon confidence in the securities of the present age; they must trust in God's folly—"such a person should become a 'fool' "—and thereby become truly wise. Nothing new is said here; this is simply the preceding argument (1:18–3:4) reinforced.

19–20 Paul now gives the theological basis for the preceding exhortation, plus its scriptural support. The way of stating it is the reverse of what was said at the beginning (1:18–25). There he set out to demonstrate that "the wisdom of God [Christ crucified] is foolishness to the world." Here he says, "The wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight." Exactly the same point is made, but now in terms of the divine perspective, which ultimately is the only one that counts. If before they were being shown the foolishness of *their* "wisdom"—because God and God's ways stand in contradiction to it—now they are being urged to adopt God's perspective altogether, since their "wisdom," after all, is folly.

And how do we know? Because once again, as earlier (1:19), there is sufficient evidence from what "is written" that God has always so regarded human efforts to understand God's ways. In this case two texts are cited, Job 5:13 and Ps. 94:11 (LXX 93:11), brought together under the keyword "the wise," along with God's attitude toward such. The citations together illustrate the utter futility of "the wise," hence the fact that their "wisdom is foolishness in God's sight." The first text is expressed in the imagery of hunting, in which the hunter uses the very craftiness, or cunning, of the prey as the means of capture.450 The ultimate irony is that people are cunningly avoiding the God with whom they have to do; but God has used that very cunning to ensnare them. Thinking themselves to be wise, they are in fact fools. The second text emphasizes their ultimate futility. God knows their reasonings, that they are futile. The obvious point for Paul, therefore, is that the Corinthians are themselves fools if they do not take seriously this divine view of things.

21a With a final emphatic "So then" (see on 3:7), Paul brings the present argument to its conclusion, which is at once exhortation, theology, and doxology. The passage has a kind of grandeur that makes

one hesitant to comment on it; nonetheless, to see what makes up that grandeur may cause the hearing of it to be all the greater. He begins with exhortation (v. 21a), proceeds to give the theological basis for it (vv. 21b–22), and concludes with a near-doxology (v. 23) in which everything is grounded in the ultimate theological truth—the unity of God. Before such majesty the Corinthian believers' divisions and worldly wisdom are altogether silenced and brought to nothing.

First, then, the exhortation: "No more boasting [in] human leaders." With these words the appeal with which all of this began (1:10–12) is finally addressed directly, by the weaving together of two threads: their sloganeering in the name of their teachers (1:12; 3:4) and their boasting, as though they were self-sufficient (1:29, 31). At this point the NIV has probably not quite caught the intent of Paul's usage of the word "boast," which becomes a problem. At the same time it flows directly out of the immediately preceding predicate, that God knows the reasonings of the wise to be futile. In light of all that has been said—about the power of God's wisdom in the cross, about servant leadership that reflects the character of the cross, about God's contempt for the futility of worldly wisdom—in light of all that, let no one among you still be bold enough to say "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos." That is to ground one's confidence in the creature, mere mortals all. Rather, Paul will now direct their focus one final time to the Creator, who is God over all.

21b–22 This sentence begins with an untranslated "for," which gives the theological basis for "no more boasting in/about human leaders." Why not? *Because* "all things are yours." These words are predicated on the final theological conclusion to come (v. 23), in which this statement is repeated and the ultimate basis added: "All things are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God." With these words Paul completely transforms their slogans. They say (lit.), "*I* am *of Paul,* etc." With the analogy of the field (vv. 5–9) Paul changed that to "*you* are *of God.*" Now he makes the further transformation, "*All things* are *of you*, including Paul, Apollos, and Cephas." This turns their slogans completely on their head, with the significant difference that the pronoun is plural, not singular. Thus, they may not say "I belong to Paul or Apollos or Cephas," not only because that is to boast in mere humans, but because that is the precise opposite of reality in Christ. In him, as Paul will later say in lofty cadences, God has already begun what will eventually be brought to full consummation, namely "all things in heaven and earth under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 1:10); therefore, Paul can affirm that presently, *all things are yours* (plural).

The list of "all things" begins with the three men (Paul, Apollos, Cephas) mentioned early on (1:12), around whose names the Corinthians are clustering in some form of jealousy and strife (3:3). This of course is the point of everything. One is therefore not quite prepared for the sudden expansion of the list, which really does include *all things*. One wonders whether Paul himself had all this in mind when the sentence began. Nonetheless it is altogether true to his theology. These five items, "the world, life, death, the present, and the future," are the ultimate tyrannies of human existence, to which people are in lifelong bondage as slaves. For Paul the death and resurrection of Jesus marked the turning of the ages in such a way that nothing lies outside Christ's jurisdiction. In the form of the cross God has planted his flag on planet Earth and marked it off as his own possession; hence the "world" is his. So also with the whole of existence ("life" and "death"), which are immediately placed into eschatological perspective ("the present and the future").455 Because in Christ Jesus both "life" itself and therefore "the future" are ours, "death" is ours as well, as is "the present." We die, but "life" cannot be taken from us; we live the life of the future in the present age, and therefore the present has become our own possession. For those in Christ Jesus, what things were formerly tyrannies are now their new birthright. This is the glorious freedom of the children of God. They are free lords of all things, not bound to the whims of chance or the exigencies of life and death. The future is no cause for panic; it is already theirs. In light of such expansive realities, how can the Corinthians say, "I am of Paul, or Apollos"? That is too narrow, too constricted a view. Apollos—and Paul, and Peter, and the whole universe—is/are yours. You do not belong to them; they belong to you, as your servants, because "you—and they—are Christ's, and Christ is God's."

23 These final words come close to doxology: "All things are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God." As already noted, this affirmation serves as the ultimate theological basis for what has

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preceded. It serves also as its proper qualification. Paul's point is not that "all things are yours" willy-nilly, or selfishly, or in the same sense as they were to the Stoic, who regarded "possession of all things" as making one "self-sufficient"—and therefore ultimately independent and self-centered. "All things are yours" because you belong to Christ; and all things are his (cf. 15:23–28). Thus it is only in Christ that the believer possesses all things; but *in him* the believer does indeed possess all things.

The final crescendo resounds: "and Christ is God's." For some this text has raised moments of concern; for Paul it is simply the final note of triumph. The point of the whole argument has been "possession." Paul's Jewish heritage had taught him well: God is one (Deut. 6:4). God is therefore the ultimate reality, the One who created and therefore possesses all things and outside of whose ultimate control lies nothing. Everything Paul understands about the work of Christ is predicated on that singular reality. This is therefore a soteriological statement, not a christological one (in terms of Christ's *being*). In keeping with the rest of the NT, most such soteriological statements, when they include words about the Father and Son, express subordination (cf. 8:6; 15:27–28). But it is functional subordination, not ontological, that is, just as what is said much later (in 15:23–28) it has to do with Christ's function as savior, not with his being as God. God is one; and Christian existence, brought about by the death and resurrection of Christ, is ultimately to be found in the one God. It cannot possibly get any better than that.

On this high note Paul's response to the Corinthian pride in human leaders and wisdom has come to a fitting conclusion. But the problem is larger still; so he turns next to deal with their attitudes toward himself in particular. But that's the next chapter.

The Corinthian error is an easy one to repeat. Not only do most of us have normal tendencies to turn natural preferences into exclusive ones, but in our fallenness we also tend to consider ourselves "wise" enough to inform God through whom he may minister to his people. Our slogans take the form of "I am of the Presbyterians," or "of the Pentecostals," or "of the Roman Catholics." Or they might take ideological forms: "I am of the liberals," or "of the evangelicals," or "of the fundamentalists." And these are also used as weapons: "Oh, he's a fundamentalist, you know." Which means that we no longer need to listen to him, since his ideology has determined his overall value as one who speaks in God's behalf. It is hardly possible in a day like ours that one will not have denominational, theological, or ideological *preferences*. The difficulty lies in our allowing that it might really be true that "all things are ours," including those whom we think God would do better to be without. But God is full of surprises; and the Eternal One may choose to minister to us from the least expected of sources, if we were but more truly "in Christ" and therefore free in him to learn and to love.

This does not mean that one should not be discriminating; after all, Paul has no patience for that teaching in Corinth which had abandoned the pure gospel of Christ. But to be "of Christ" is also to be free from the tyrannies of one's own narrowness, free to learn even from those with whom one may disagree.[3]

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Mark A. Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, New American Commentary
Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (NICNT)
Anthony Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (NIGTC)
Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary
Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, IVP New Testament Commentary
David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, The Bible Speaks Today
William Baker, *1 Corinthians*, Cornerstone Bible Commentary
Paul Ellingwroth and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on 1 Corinthians*, UBSH

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