

**United in Christ: Overcoming the Challenges of Diversity**  
**Studies in 1 Corinthians**  
**Putting It All in Perspective (1 Cor. 3:18-23)**

**Intro: In our lessons so far we've seen that the Corinthian church was divided because they were being influenced by values that were a part of their culture. Because they weighed the wisdom of their teachers by human standards (what they knew and how they spoke) they had resorted to comparing teachers and divisions resulted from their loyalty to those who had taught them. As we have seen so far, Paul has met their issues methodically and powerfully. He had to correct their whole mindset piece by piece.**

They needed to understand that God did not save them by human wisdom, but by what human wisdom could have never conceived—by the message of the cross.

They needed to understand that God saved them in that way in order that He might eliminate the kind of human glorying and boasting that they were practicing.

Consequently Paul points out that his preaching was in harmony with God's purposes. He determined to knowing nothing but Christ, and to speak, not with words of human wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and power. However to say that men like Paul and Apollos did not speak with human wisdom did not mean that the message they preached was not wise. The Corinthians needed to understand that the message that Paul and Apollos preached was God's wisdom revealed by the Holy Spirit.

Likewise they needed to understand that the messengers of the gospel were God's servants and they should not divide over them. Or to put it another way, they were plants in God's field; they were stones in God's temple.

Consequently Paul uses the occasion to tender a practical word of warning to both those who would seek to build the temple of God or to those who would seek to tear it down.

Finally as the chapter closes Paul brings together the themes of these three chapters into a summary exhortation and observation:

*Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become foolish that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, "He is the one who catches the wise in their craftiness;" and again, "The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless." So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God. (1 Corinthians 3:18-23)*

**I have never in well over thirty something years of preaching chosen this text for a sermon. Perhaps that is one advantage of expository teaching; it makes us confront all the word of God and not just the portions that are easier to expound or that seem more immediately relevant. But if we understand Paul's words in**

**this paragraph we will see that they convey an important message to the Corinthians and to us.**

**What is Paul doing in this text?**

**I suggest that he is trying to restore the Corinthians to a proper perspective. If we have followed Paul argument and understood the situation at Corinth, the Corinthians have gotten virtually everything backwards and out of sorts.**

First they were evaluating everything by the standards of the community in which they are living. And since human wisdom played such an important role in the culture, they used this wisdom to access their experience as disciples.

Based on the idea that knowledge of many things and excellence of speech (rhetoric) is the hallmark of wisdom, they begin to exalt one teacher over another.

They develop a sense of belonging and importance based on who the teacher is. Thus, “I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas, I am of Christ.”

Perhaps they had deceived themselves into thinking that they had figured it all out—that they were pretty smart. The fact is they were wrong on every point.

**Paul in effect in this paragraph turns the whole Corinthian mindset upside-down and seeks to put things again in proper perspective.**

**How does Paul do this?**

**First he affirms that no one is truly wise until he divests himself of human wisdom!**

*Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become foolish that he may become wise. (1 Cor. 3:18)*

Paul follows with the reasons why this is so:

*For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.*

Ironically, most Greeks thought the wisdom of the gospel was foolishness; God returns the “compliment.” In actuality, what smartest man’s wisdom would be foolishness to the one who made it all!

Furthermore, Paul explains that this truth is in keeping with yet other Scriptural statements about God’s wisdom in comparison with human wisdom:

*For it is written, “He is the one who catches the wise in their craftiness;” and again, “The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless.” (1 Corinthians 3:19-20)*

Paul borrows here the words of Eliphaz in Job and a psalmist who both convey the superiority of the wisdom of God over human wisdom.

So the point is, since God’s wisdom is superior, it is necessary for man to divest himself of his human wisdom in order that he might receive the divine wisdom.

**Second he affirms then that no one should glory in a particular human leader, since all the teachers belong to the Corinthians and not the Corinthians to a particular teacher.**

The Corinthians had their identity and value tied up in which teacher had taught them. They were saying “I belong to Paul, Apollos, Cephas, Christ...” Their perspective was wrong; and they had made a bad trade:

*So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, (1 Corinthians 3:21-22)*

The Corinthians love of human wisdom was self-limiting. Instead of being under the possession of a single man, in reality everything was in their possession...if they embraced the wisdom of God. All those who teach in God’s kingdom are their teachers. All the blessings of God’s kingdom are their blessings. As citizens of God’s kingdom they were fellow-heirs of everything. It is as if Paul says, “You Corinthians have been living as if you belonged to a single man, when in reality you own all that is spiritual reality.”

Now such a conception might have been the occasion for Corinthian pride were it not for one other truth the Corinthians seem to have forgotten:

**Third, he affirms that both the Corinthians and their teachers belonged to Christ and God and their actions should reflect this divine ownership.**

*and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God. (1 Cor. 3:23)*

If it was important for the Corinthians to know that all things belonged to them, it was equally important for them to know that all those things also belong to Christ and God.

Because the church is God’s temple and God’s field; and they are God’s people, then everything must come under the sway of the will and word of God.

## **Application**

**Why the Corinthians needed to hear it**

We have already hopefully answered this.

Because the Corinthians had reversed God’s standard of wisdom and God’s view of teachers and consequently altered God’s purposes for His temple.

**Why we need to hear it?**

**We too like the Corinthians can succumb to the same temptation.**

**Three questions will help us apply the message.**

By what standard will we claim wisdom for ourselves and by what standards will we judge our teachers?

Those dictated by the culture?

Those revealed by God?

From what will we get our sense of identity?

That we belong to a particular teacher or group of teachers?

That all God's teachers belong to us?

From where will we get our sense of accountability?

From the belief that the church is ours to do with as we please?

From the belief that the church is God's to do with as He pleases?

**If we answer these questions proper, we will always see ourselves, our teachers in proper perspective before God and His Son.**

**Conclusion: I'm glad I've had the opportunity to think more about Paul's letter to the Corinthians. The more I read it, the more up-to-date it seems.**