



Chapter 1

Wisdom about Divisions

1 Corinthians 1-2

UNDERSTANDING

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DISCUSSION

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read 1 Corinthians 1–2

The Big Picture

St. Paul's solution to the divisions in Corinth is to look to the cross.

Chapters 1 and 2 immediately dive into the problems and culture of the church in Corinth. The community appears as a sick patient; St. Paul serves as a doctor who quickly identifies the illness (division) while figuring out one of the root causes (worldly wisdom).

Introduction (1 Corinthians 1:1–9)

St. Paul begins by identifying himself as an apostle and also mentions Sosthenes as an author of the letter. (Sosthenes is most likely a convert ruler of the Corinthian synagogue named in Acts 18:17.) As he has done in other letters, St. Paul tries to lift his readers' eyes to what they are called to—heaven (v. 2). Despite the problems and immorality in the Corinthian church, St. Paul has no problem identifying them as saints (v. 2). Sainthood does not always equal perfection; at its root, it

is instigated by God's calling and grace in our lives, not our own virtue (CCC 1996–99). Verses 4–9 also introduce several main themes found in the letter as a whole: knowledge, speech, spiritual gifts, the day of the Lord, and fellowship.

Divisions (1 Corinthians 1:10–17)

In this section, St. Paul contrasts the fellowship they have in Jesus Christ (v. 9) with their divisions. St. Paul established the church in Corinth in 50 AD and spent a year and a half ministering to the Corinthians. Other Christian leaders, such as Apollos and Cephas (St. Peter), continued St. Paul's work in Corinth. (For more on Apollos, see Acts 18:24–28.) Now, some believers claim St. Paul as their leader while others claim St. Peter or Apollos; these allegiances may be based on who baptized them (v. 12, 14–15).

St. Paul tries to bring them back to reality—Jesus Christ is the foundation of the Church (v.13). All believers should be united under the power of the cross, not a particular leader (v. 17). In trying to discourage such allegiances to their baptizers, St. Paul can appear to diminish the sacrament of baptism. And yet, it is clear the St. Paul is very much in favor of baptism (see, for instance, 1 Cor 12:13 and Gal 3:27, among others).

The Wisdom of the Cross (1 Corinthians 1:18–31)

St. Paul tries to get to the very root of the problem. The divisions are ultimately caused by the Corinthians' acceptance of Greek wisdom and rhetoric. In Corinth, philosophers and rhetoricians received the same fame and adoration that movie stars and athletes have

today. Those with the best skills at rhetoric were seen as the most trustworthy sources of knowledge. In accepting this way of thinking, the Corinthians are caught up in the rhetorical value of their arguments and of the Church leader they follow.

St. Paul communicates to the Church that the gospel does not work like Greek philosophy. The Faith is built not on worldly wisdom but on the wisdom of the cross (v. 18). This is easier said than done; as St. Paul notes, the word (or eloquence) of the cross was foolishness to those in the Roman Empire (v. 18). Being so used to the concept of crucifixion, we can lose track of its original meaning. The modern equivalent would be like saying, “The wisdom of the electric chair.”

In light of the power of the cross, the wisdom of the world appears to be foolishness (v. 19). St. Paul calls out the wise man (philosopher), the scribe (lawyer), and the debater of this age (the rhetorician) as examples of worldly wisdom (v. 20). The cross has dispelled these forms of wisdom; now the Corinthians need to follow the true wisdom accordingly (vv. 24–25).

While the wise, both Jew and Greek, have a difficult time accepting this cross (vv. 22–24), the foolish of the world have a much easier time. St. Paul’s prime example: the Corinthians themselves (vv. 26–27). Ultimately, the nature of God is to choose the lowly to shame the proud. Why? “So that no flesh might boast in the presence of God” (v. 29).

Application to Jesus

The wisdom of Jesus’ cross is what God uses to shame the wise of this world.

St. Paul's Wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:1–5)

St. Paul admits that he did not preach with eloquent wisdom when he first founded the Church in Corinth five years earlier (2:1; 1:17). Rather than offering Greek wisdom, St. Paul unashamedly offers the wisdom of the Spirit of God (vv. 2–4). St. Paul is proud of this: He doesn't want the faith of the Corinthians to rest on a sophisticated presentation, but rather to rest on the cross of Jesus Christ.

Application to Our Lives

We can encounter God through His living Word, which can speak into our lives.

The Wisdom of This Age (1 Corinthians 2:6–9)

St. Paul continues to contrast “the wisdom of this age” with the hidden mysterious plan of God—the wisdom of the cross (vv. 6–8). It is apparent that the wisdom of the world had quite a hold on the Corinthians. One's economic prosperity was partially dependent on accepting this wisdom. Unlike other places in the Roman Empire, Corinth was a place where someone could easily climb the ladder to a better life. Much of this was a result of the Corinthians' relationships and connections to others in the city. As a result, there was plenty of pressure to fit in and not damage these relationships. Seeing the culture's influence on these young Christians, St. Paul challenges the Corinthians to see the world from the perspective of God, not of their neighbors.

The Spirit Versus Wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:10–16)

For St. Paul, the Spirit is the key in combating the wisdom of the world. The Spirit of God allows us to properly understand our gifts (v. 12) and interpret spiritual truths (v. 13) as opposed to worldly wisdom. Finally, St. Paul contrasts the unspiritual or fleshly man with the spiritual (v. 14). The spiritual man knows the mind of Christ, the ultimate wisdom.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

1 Corinthians 1-2

STEP 1: OPENER

Have you ever had trouble getting along with someone?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

Chapters 1 and 2 immediately dive into the problems and culture of the Church in Corinth. The community appears as a sick patient, and St. Paul serves as a doctor who quickly identifies the illness (division) while figuring out one of the root causes (worldly wisdom).

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Today's passage is 1 Corinthians 1-2. Start by reading 1 Corinthians 1:1-17.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

1. What is wrong with the Church in Corinth?

Answer: Several divisions have formed within the community. Specifically, members are divided over which leader to follow.

2. In his last public prayer, Jesus prayed for unity. Read John 17:21–23. With this in mind, what are the effects of division?

Answer: First, we go against the commandment of Jesus Himself. Second, when we fail to have unity, the world does not come to know the love of God and believe in Him.

3. How has division influenced the Christian Church throughout history?

Answer: The Church has been plagued by division throughout its history. In the early Church, there were many divisions over the identity of Jesus. In the 11th century, the Eastern Orthodox Church broke off from the Catholic Church. In the 16th century, the Reformation occurred. The last two centuries have seen an increasing number of divisions and new Christian denominations.

4. What do you think causes division in our Church today?

Allow the group to discuss.

5. Even though 1 Corinthians is filled with problems like division and sexual immorality, why do you think St. Paul still called the Corinthians “sanctified” (or “holy,” in the Greek) in verse 2?

Answer: Despite their problems, God had still called them into a relationship with Him. God’s grace and calling are much more foundational in our status before God. Sainthood does not necessarily mean perfection (CCC 1996–99).

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18–31.

6. Why would the cross be a stumbling block to Jews and a folly to the Gentiles?

Answer: For the Jews, they were expecting a Messiah who would overthrow the political powers at hand (the Romans). Jesus’ death on the cross at the hands of the Roman authority seems to be absolutely contrary to this idea. For the pagans, the cross was their form of capital punishment. Saying “the wisdom of the cross” would be like saying “the wisdom of the electric chair” today.

7. What are some of the popular philosophies and thinkers of our day?

Allow the group to discuss.

8. Read CCC 2727. How does the wisdom of the world contrast with the teaching of Jesus Christ and the Church?

Answer: In contrast with the teaching of Jesus Christ and the Church, the wisdom of the world looks at reason and science as the only sources of truth, and material goods or sensuality as the ultimate goal.

9. What role do you think the media (news, television shows, movies, etc.) play in influencing us to trust the wisdom and advice of the world?

Answer: Even without intentionally affirming the actions and ideas found in the media, we can still subtly accept them and allow them to influence us on topics ranging from how we view dating, marriage, wealth, self-image, and other issues.

10. In CCC 2727, how does prayer help us combat the wisdom of the world?

Answer: "Prayer is a mystery that overflows both our conscious and unconscious lives."

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1–9.

11. Why do you think the wisdom of the world was so tempting for the Corinthians to follow?

Answer: Refer to the "The Wisdom of This Age" section in "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?"

12. Think about a time when a professor was teaching something contrary to Christianity in class. What goes through your mind in these situations?

Allow the group to discuss.

13. What is at stake for you as a student to say or live contrary to this worldly wisdom?

Allow the group to discuss.

14. Looking at St. Paul's argument and your own example, what is the purpose of God's use of the wisdom of the cross?

Answer: Ultimately, it allows us to take pride in God alone.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:10–16.

15. For St. Paul, how should the Corinthians combat the wisdom of the world?

Answer: St. Paul points to the wisdom found in the Holy Spirit as their ultimate guide.

16. How will this solve their problem of division?

Answer: Rather than trusting in the wisdom of the world or a particular leader, they will be guided by the same Spirit.

17. How do you think we use the Spirit today to counter the wisdom of the world?

Answer: The wisdom of the Holy Spirit is found in a number of ways today. The Bible was written under the inspiration of the Spirit and contains wisdom for our lives (CCC 105). The Church is guided by the Holy Spirit in its teachings (CCC 688). Finally, we are given the gifts of the Holy Spirit (particularly wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and counsel) through baptism and confirmation (CCC 1831–32).

