

VCBC SLG Fall Term 2023
The Book of I Corinthians
Lesson #2
First Report from the Chloe's Household
Part I – chs. 1-2

1: 1 - 9 A most unusual greeting

“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, 2 To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours:

3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. 5 For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— 6 God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. 7 Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. 8 He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Paul: an apostle of Christ Jesus

- This, in itself, is not unusual in that this is Paul's emphasis in most of the letters he writes, emphasizing that he is an apostle of Christ Jesus either by God's will, God's command or sent by God and not men, but in this letter to the Corinthians, it bears special significance in that the Corinthians obviously dispute his status as an “Apostle” called by Jesus Christ the criteria of whom is defined by Peter in Acts 1 as they seek to find Judas' replacement: **“Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, 22 beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.”** (Acts 1: 21-22)
- To this, Paul eventually defends himself by saying, **“Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?”** (I Cor. 9:1)
- We shall look at Paul's defense in more details in chapter 9. For now, Paul emphasizes right from the beginning that **“he is an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God”**, meaning it is the will of God, not of men, nor of himself.

Sosthenes:

- At the founding of the church in Corinth (in Acts 18), Sosthenes was introduced as the Synagogue Ruler that bore the blunt of the violent opposition of the Jews against Paul and company and was beaten. It is safe to assume that he is the same Sosthenes who must have gone to Ephesus with Paul (and thus joins Paul in sending his greetings to his home church).

The Church in Corinth “sanctified” in Christ Jesus:

- Paul points out that they have not only been “*sanctified*” in Christ Jesus but are “*called saints*” (literal translation of the Greek).
- It is most unusual, given the fact that Paul would go on to paint a very unfavorable spiritual life of these “saints”
 - They have caused divisions in the church
 - They tolerated sexual immorality of a kind that was not even accepted by the secular world (ch.5)
 - They disgraced the name of the Lord by taking one another to secular court (ch.6) and
 - They observed the Lord’ Supper in the most unholy way (ch.11), and more...
 - And yet Paul still calls them “saints”, and that speaks to the amazing truth that “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:10).
 - And, in lumping “all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” as one indivisible body, Paul refers Christ as “their Lord”—meaning those saints everywhere, and also “ours”—lumping the Corinthians together with himself and Sosthenes—and he is not ashamed to be part of the Corinthian Christians.
- However, given their ill-will and disrespect toward Paul, we couldn’t help but ask, “*Is Paul being sincere in his greetings, and in the prayer that follows?*”

Grace and Peace:

- As much as it seems to be a standard greeting, we should not forget that no word in the Scripture is superfluous, and that as a wish expressed by the apostle Paul, he does mean and pray that the church in Corinth would enjoy the kind of grace and peace which could only be bestowed from “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”.
- On the one hand, the oneness and equality of the Father and Jesus is expressed, on the other hand, the Corinthians should receive it, by faith—just as we should accept and receive the “benediction” at the end of each worship service, not as empty words, but as a sacrament which should be received by faith.

A Thanksgiving Prayer

- “**I always thank my God for you**”: again, these are no empty words, but reflect Paul’s love for them and his commitment and discipline of interceding for them. Understandably, this is a church “born” or “founded” by him, and he sees them as his own children—in as much as their rejection against him, Paul never ceases to love them as his own.
- Giving thanks: immediately we would wonder with a church like Corinth, is there really anything for which Paul can give thanks? Is his thanksgiving genuine?

- Well, whatever Paul gives thanks for, they are genuinely true:
 - Enriched in every way—especially in speech and knowledge, to the point that they do not lack any spiritual gifts
 - Based on what Paul goes on to say of the church, it is obviously true in that they are really very gifted, as least when it comes to “visible” gifts like tongue speaking, prophesying etc. It is also not inconceivable that because of these gifts, they have been able to continue to evangelise and convert others to Christ.
 - However, beyond these “visible” gifts, Paul commends them in their eager waiting for the Lord’s return:
 - Throughout the NT writings, scholars agree that the early Christians most, if not all, did expect the return of Jesus to be very imminent. So, this is not just true of the Corinthians, but of all churches at the time.
 - So, it appears the Corinthian Christians are suffering from a spiritual case of Schizophrenia—on the one hand, they are truly and eagerly awaiting the Lord’s return, on the other hand, such eagerness or anticipation has not impacted the way they live! Food for thought—as we also are convinced of the imminent return of our Lord given the successive fulfillments of many of the signs mentioned by Jesus of His return (Matthew 24 & Luke 21).
- **“He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ”**
 - I do not think that Paul is not sincere in his greetings and his prayers, nor is he using “positive thinking”, but rather
 - He firmly believes that the God **“who has called you into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord”** is **“faithful”** (1:9)—God has called the Corinthians to be His children, He will see them through the end.
 - How? Perhaps, through this letter that he is now writing. In so writing, he is co-working with God in helping them to stand firm and be blameless should they repent and heed his admonitions.
 - He also firmly believes that God will answer his prayers, or
 - In other words, Paul believes in the power of prayers!
- We are called **“into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord”**
 - If you ask the average Christian, “What has God called you into?”
 - Of all the answers one might give, I am afraid, none of them includes, **“into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”**
 - Just pause and consider: If this is the purpose of our calling:

- How then shall we live?
- What priority should we give to our daily quiet time?
- How then shall we look at our so-called ministry for Him?
- How then shall we look at our life’s changing circumstances and challenges?
- Remember, it is with this purpose of our calling in mind that Paul admonishes us to “**maintain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him**” (I Cor. 7:17)—talking about not interpreting out of context!

Christ Jesus:

- One more unusual characteristic of this greeting is that Paul mentions about Christ nine times within these short nine verses (see the underlined words in the beginning). Allow me to repeat:
 - **called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus**
 - **sanctified in Christ Jesus**
 - **who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ**
 - **Grace and peace from Lord Jesus Christ**
 - **grace given in Christ Jesus**
 - **our testimony about Christ**
 - **eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ**
 - **blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ**
 - **fellowship with Jesus Christ our Lord.**

This pretty much describes the fullness, blessings and purpose of our life in Christ—the centrality of Christ in our faith is made very plain by Paul.

1: 10 – 6:20 Addressing reports from the Chloe’s Household

1: 10 – 4: 21 First “report” - The Elevation of Human Wisdom in the Church

1: 10 – 1: 17 Divisions within the church based on elevation of human leaders

“10 (but) I appeal to you, brothers in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. 11 My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. 12 What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas [i.e. Peter]”; still another, “I follow Christ.”

13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. 16 (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”

- The backdrop:
 - While we all are called into **“fellowship with Jesus Christ our Lord”** (v.9)
 - The Corinthians do not live out such reality, instead of being one in Christ, they divide themselves into “parties” or “factions”
 - Outwardly they are still meeting together as a church, but in essence, they are not agreeing with one another (literally translated, not saying the same thing)
 - i.e. they are not having the same mind and same thought
 - which, of course, is not possible in the ordinary course of life
 - but logically (or likely) when it applies to church matters such as decision making (e.g. dealing with immoral behavior within the church), resolutions of disputes (financial disputes among them) and interpretation or applications of Scriptural truths (to eat or not to eat food sacrificed to idols).
- A most gentle urge:
 - Paul urges them with a very gentle verb (*parakaleo*) and,
 - Calling them “brothers”, a term he uses 39 times in this letter (versus the next most numerous times in Romans and I Thessalonians of 19 times each)
 - And the call is for “restoration” to its right condition—the same word is used in Matthew 4:21 for the mending of nets, and
 - The condition is that of having oneness in the fellowship with Christ.
- The manifestation of their divisions
 - They quarrel: they base or back up their opinions with the use of the authority of the leaders they claim to be loyal to, and
 - In the church of Corinth, the most noted ones or ones who have nurtured them in the main are Apollos and Paul, while some claim their authority based on and their loyalty to Christ.
 - The main issue is the use of these names to further their cause and authority, not so much of their true respect for Apollos, Paul or even Christ, and
 - Their insistence of their “correctness” has turned into “wars of words”, and worse, “Party-lines”.
- Party-lines
 - The desire to distinguish oneself as more correct, more spiritual or even more pleasing to the Lord leads to a divided body of Christ, and thus Paul challenges them on two fronts:

- “Is Christ divided?”—the obvious answer is “no” and can never be! Anytime, we feel more correct, more spiritual and more pleasing to God than others, we divide Christ and forget that we are one in fellowship with Christ;
- “Was Paul crucified for you?”—again, the answer is “no”
 - Presumably those who use Paul as their authority (even in defending the apostleship of Paul), blindly base their arguments on loyalty to Paul and again, for the ultimate purpose of distinguishing themselves from the rest—such a desire for distinction is division!
 - Even these days, from time to time, I hear people brag about by whom they were baptized (including by me), as if they are special and presumably, they are simply copying the example of the Corinthians to which Paul strongly object.
 - His words in v. 17 set “baptism” in its proper place: **“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel”**—baptism is an important expression of our repentance and acknowledgement of our commitment to Christ as our Lord and Savior, but not the means to salvation itself!

1: 18 – 1: 31 The follies of human wisdom made obvious

The last words in the above exhortation reveal the basic error of their divisions: **“but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”**

- i. Where are the revered human sages versus where is Christ now?

18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”

20 Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. 22 Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

Presumable, as they pledge their allegiance to and draw authority from either Apollos or Paul, it is based on their words of wisdom and their speech of eloquence. Some see Apollos excel above Paul (as he is from Alexandria after all, the land of profound learning with the world 2nd largest

library at the time), and no doubt in terms of rhetoric and delivery, Apollos does have an advantage, while Paul is, in general, not too inferior!

- However, Paul’s emphasis is the message itself, not rhetoric, delivery or even the spicing up of the message with profound human philosophy and knowledge
- The message of the gospel (which is the power to save souls for eternity) remains the crucifixion of Christ, period!
- It is not an offering of a better life—which most religions offer
- It is not a path to self-fulfillment or nirvana—which most eastern religions promise
- It is not a salvation by doing good—which most religions attempt to make people feel good about themselves
 - It is Christ’s crucified—the righteous for the unrighteous as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world, thereby appeasing the wrath of God and ushering those who believe into eternal life.
 - But such a message is “foolishness” (or nonsense) and unattractive to those who are perishing
 - But to preach anything else, or to water-down such a message, will be the **“emptying of the power of the cross”!**
- While quoting from Isaiah 29:14 which says, **“the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the wise will vanish”**, Paul translates the original Hebrew slightly differently (even from the LXX) and says, **“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate (or set aside).”** Which is essentially the same:
- How will they be destroyed and frustrates? Paul zeros in on one extremely important aspect and ask **“Where?”**
 - Those wise men the Corinthians revere (like the rest of the world then) would be Plato Aristotle, Socrates etc.
 - Paul asks: “Where are they?”
 - The answer is: they all have been dead for a good 400 years by then!
 - The un-asked question is: “Where is Christ crucified?” and the answer is: He has risen, He is alive and will live forever and ever!
 - So, who is wise, and who is foolish?
 - The answer is obvious!
- So Paul concludes that: **“Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God!”**
 - If we look to anything else for the ultimate answer to life, we are foolish!
 - Whether in human philosophy like the Greek, or
 - Any magical or mystical sign or profound experience, like the Jews!

ii. God has chosen them (and us)—the lowly and made us wise!

“26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 God chose the

lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him. 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

- In essence the quote from Isaiah continues – “**I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate .**”
- But this time, Paul uses the Corinthian Christians as a prime example
- While there must be some who were well schooled, of noble birth and occupied influential roles in the society before they became Christians, but the majority (like most churches even in our days) were not.
- However, it is not a case, some would maintain that only the weak, the lowly need a religious clutch. No, it is not the case that most Christians are lowly, less educated and cannot make it in the world and thus they choose Christ. It is just the opposite: we did not choose Christ, but Christ “chose us” (John 15:16) for a reason, and
- The reason is: “**to shame the wise...to nullify the things that are** (in human terms).
- Just for the sake of interest: the Greek word for the “foolish” is the word “*moron*” in English!
- So are we “morons” by putting our trust in Christ? Just the opposite: by having Christ in us, we are the truly “wise”, because Christ is “**our righteousness, holiness and redemption.**”
 - Where else can we become righteous before God?
 - How else can we become holy to benefit God’s indwelling?
 - Who else can and has died in our stead to atone for our sins!
 - To try anything else
 - To trust anyone else
 - Is not only totally futile but are true “morons”!
 - So, why boast in human wisdom!

2: 1 – 2:16 We are spiritually discerned, not the world—don’t sell ourselves short!

“And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony of God. 2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. 4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.”

- As much as I said the last time that before Paul’s arrival in Corinth, he did not have much success in Athens where he sought to debate with the philosophers, and that some opine that was the reason why he said, “**I came to you in weakness with great fear and**

trembling.” But Paul makes it clear that that is part of his “resolve”, he did it deliberately, because he knew that by himself, he could do nothing, he could accomplish nothing for the Kingdom of God. He has to depend entirely on the message of the Cross and its power. But that is not his inherent power.

- The more he fears, the more he would depend on the Spirit of God; the more trembling he is, the more prayerful would his spirit be.
- I am glad to say that after years of serving the Lord, I feel more inadequate, the more “trembling” I have become in my preparation. But time and time again, God is faithful, and I know it is not really me or my preparation, but His grace, His power that is manifested.
- The challenge to all servants of the Lord is that as much as we need to do a good and thorough preparation each time, we do not trust in our preparation. If we put our trust in our preparation, we inevitably put more emphasis in window-dressing our argument and our delivery to make it sound appealing and convincing. The result is often the opposite—we have emptied the power of the Cross!

6 We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature (or perfect), but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. 7 No, we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9 However, as it is written: “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived”— the things God has prepared for those who love him—10 these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.

- Paul is quick to add that the message of the cross is not shallow or foolish at all in the ears of the “perfect”, meaning those who by faith have been made perfect or righteous in the eyes of God.
- Indeed, if we unfold the word of God faithfully, not to please the ears of the hearers, not to impress upon people with our scholarship or worldly knowledge
- Those who are perfect (or mature in Christ) would have a great feast, while the world, and the carnal Christians would find it dull, boring or unconvincing, but it is more a testimony of their spiritual apathy than the message itself.
- “Mystery” in the NT always points to God’s redemption plan in Christ that was hidden in the past and now made manifest by Christ’s death and resurrection.
- This plan and way of redemption through the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son of God is truly **“What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived”**.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. 11 For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. 12 What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. 13 This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. 14 The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness and

cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. 15 The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, 16 for, “Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

- Finally, Paul urges the Corinthians not to sell themselves short!
- Yes, the world reveres human wisdom and thus, “**14 The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.**”
- The world might produce all kinds of philosophical hypotheses, high and good sounding propositions to solve human woes and improve quality of life, even spiritual life, and claims to have found the secret to nirvana and look down upon our simple message of the cross, Paul urges us to see who we are
 - We are the discerning; we are the one with the sound judgment
 - Why?
 - Because we have the Spirit of God
 - Who knows the thought of God and thus enables us to do the same. As a result:
 - **“we may understand what God has freely given us”**
 - **“we may explain spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words”**
 - **“we may make judgment about all things”**
 - **While not subject to human judgment!**
 - This is not exaggeration, because we do **“have the mind of Christ”**
 - Do not sell ourselves short!