

1 Corinthians 1:1-25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians 1, verses 1-25 1 Corinthians 1, verses 1-25 1 Corinthians 1, verses 1-25 1 Corinthians 1, verses 1-25 1 Corinthians 1, verses 1-25

But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, and folly to Gentiles. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. Paul begins his first epistle to the Corinthians, introducing himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will.

Paul generally, but not always, introduces himself in his letters as an apostle. The epistles to the Thessalonians being the main exception to the norm. He writes as one called person to a body of called people.

And he writes with the co-author, Sosthenes. Sosthenes may have been a fellow worker we don't read of elsewhere. Sosthenes wasn't an uncommon name. Some have argued that he might have been Paul's amanuensis, as we learn in chapter 16 verse 21 that Paul hadn't written most of the letter in his own writing, presumably having someone else to write it for him.

[3 : 21] However, it seems most likely to me that Sosthenes was the same man as the one mentioned in Acts chapter 18 verse 17, the account of Paul's first visit to Corinth. And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal.

The Corinthians have been set apart by God, called to be holy, part of a wider body of Christians around the world, who call on the name of Jesus, bound together by their common Lord.

Paul's opening benediction, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, is quite characteristic of his work. The life of the church and every Christian is founded upon this grace and peace, so it's entirely appropriate that it would be to this that Paul appeals at the beginning of his epistles.

Paul had first visited Corinth in Acts chapter 18. In verses 1 to 11 of that chapter we read, When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.

And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads. I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles. And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshipper of God.

[4 : 58] His house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing Paul, believed and were baptized.

And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.

And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. Paul often begins his letters with thanksgiving. Here he gives thanks for the entire span of the salvation that the Corinthians enjoy, from its first incipience in the work of the gospel arriving among them, to the faithful empowering and sustaining of Christ as they wait for his appearing, to the vindication that they will receive on the great and final day of the Lord.

God has called them into the fellowship of his Son, and he is faithful to confirm them in that fellowship and preserve them to the end. In verse 10, Paul gets right to the point of his letter, appealing to the Corinthians to be in agreement, to avoid division, and to be united in mind and judgment.

He has heard from Chloe's people that there are divisions among them. Chloe was possibly a business person whose servants had brought news to Paul. The Corinthians had become sectarian, with various parties opening up among them, with different members identifying with different teachers and leaders, some with Paul, some with Peter or Cephas, some with Apollos, and some with Christ.

[6 : 26] And Paul will later argue for a proper way of considering the relationship between different ministers. However, with a number of prominent and charismatic leaders, it was not surprising that the Corinthians would form parties around their favourite figures, in ways that led to division and sectarianism in the congregation.

The church, as will become clear in chapter 12, is characterised by diversity, but a diversity through which unity is achieved through many gifts being exercised in different ways for the common good.

The mind that the church has should not be sectarian either, because the one mind of Christ is that mind, mentioned in chapter 2, verse 16. The different ministers in the church should be regarded not as competitors, but as collaborators in a grand shared task, each performing different roles in a way that's complementary, not competitive.

Paul argues this in chapter 3. Christ is undivided. He unites all true ministers. Christ isn't the head of a sect of his own, alongside a sect of Peter and Paul and Apollos.

He is the one to whom all are subject, and the one that all serve. Paul presses this point further. Paul was not crucified for the Corinthians. Christ's cross, which Paul proclaims, is unique.

[7 : 42] It's an event that defines all Christians, whoever their more immediate leaders might be. What Paul is doing here is simply applying the teaching of Christ himself from Matthew chapter 23, verses 8 to 12.

But you are not to be called Rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one father who is in heaven.

Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. Just as Paul wasn't crucified for the Corinthians, they weren't baptised in his name.

Baptism is, for Paul, an event that has a defining force for the Christian. It seals them as Christ's people. However, the identity of the minister who performs the baptism is irrelevant.

What matters is that it is baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that it is baptism into Christ, into his death and resurrection. Given the existence of these misunderstandings among the Corinthians, Paul is thankful that he only baptised a few of them.

[8 : 49] Had he baptised more of them, they might have been tempted to think that their baptism by Paul made them members of a special group of Pauline believers, members of a party associated with Paul.

However, Christ had not sent Paul to baptise, but to preach the gospel. Paul is an apostle of Christ Jesus, a servant of his Lord, not a man forming his own movement.

If he had a ministry focused upon baptism, he might have been a new sort of John the Baptist. The people baptised by John were associated with John, and many of them became his disciples.

Paul baptised, but his ministry was not one of baptism. There was no baptism of Paul, as there had been a baptism of John. Rather, Paul was the bearer of a message, the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the declaration of the kingdom and the lordship of Jesus the Messiah.

Although Paul was a profoundly gifted rhetorician, his skills clearly being on display here and throughout this letter, the point of his preaching was not eloquence, but direct presentation of the cross of Christ, where the real power lies, not in Paul's golden tongue.

[9 : 57] Had Paul's ministry been one of eloquent wisdom, the danger would have been that Paul's rhetorical gifts would have eclipsed the message he was proclaiming, and the master he was serving. It was all about Christ for Paul, and anything that Paul did that distracted from that, or eclipsed that, would have been illegitimate.

However, at the very heart of the Christian gospel lies the reality of the cross, the stark and brutal execution of Jesus of Nazareth on a tree by the Romans.

This stands in the starkest possible contrast to any religion that is preoccupied with competitive social alignment and rhetorical artistry, all of which belong to the manner of this present age.

The word of the cross is considered foolishness by all who operate on this age's terms, those who are perishing. However, to those who are being saved, it is recognized in all of its startling alienness as the power of God himself.

Paul cites Isaiah chapter 29 verse 14 here. Beginning at verse 13, this passage reads, This is also a theme that Jesus brings out in his own teaching, perhaps most famously in Matthew chapter 11 verses 25 to 27.

[11 : 29] At that time Jesus declared, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

The cross is scandalous. It's offensive. It's foolish to the sensibilities and the expectations of both Jews and Gentiles. If you were a shrewd marketer of the Christian message, you would probably downplay all of the cross stuff and major on Jesus as a wise teacher instead.

If you emphasized Jesus as a great philosopher and religious teacher, the Greeks wouldn't have so much of a problem dealing with the fact that he was killed by the authorities who resisted his wisdom.

They had Socrates. The Jews could deal with a great and powerful prophet who performed mighty signs, yet was martyred by wicked leaders. There were several such figures in their history.

[12:32] However, accenting the cross as he did made Paul's message of the gospel seem nonsensical and offensive to both parties. There might be ways artfully to weave the shame, humiliation, and rejection of the cross into an appealing story of Jesus, but to lead with these things is ridiculous and foolish.

Yet God's power and wisdom are in direct conflict with the wisdom of the world and cannot be recognized by the wise of this age. Of course, the cross isn't ultimately foolish, but it seems as such to those of this age who operate on this world's terms.

Those whose eyes have been opened by God, whether Jews or Gentiles, can see it, but others cannot. The cross, which seems the moment of greatest impotence, is the moment of God's power overcoming the world.

The supposed foolishness of God is beyond the fathoming of human wisdom, and the imagined weakness of God is stronger than all of the strength of men. In speaking in such a manner, Paul undermines the forces animating the struggle for status among the Corinthians.

The cross of Christ nullifies and renders foolish the quest for status and power and wisdom that preoccupies people. It reveals that true wisdom, true honor, and true power lie somewhere where people are least likely to look for it.

[13 : 54] Paul, by stripping away the pretensions of eloquence, of status, and human power, wishes the Corinthians to see that the power, the wisdom, and the honor always lay in the cross itself.

And in doing this, he wants to accomplish a revolution in their values, which would result in a transformation of their behavior, as they saw that the things that really mattered were not the things that they were preoccupied with, the things that led to the divisions and the conflicts among them.

A question to consider. What are some ways in which we are in danger of drawing attention away from the wisdom, power, and glory of God, out of shame and embarrassment about the cross, seeking to appeal to typical notions of human wisdom, power, and glory in their place?

