



1 CORINTHIANS – FACT SHEET 2

Chapter 1:17-31:

Although during Paul's founding missionary journey, 'many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptised' (Acts 18:8); just like God's people today, they brought their backgrounds and 'baggage' with them. The church at Corinth, although 'Gods Church' (1:2), was ultimately a 'grace community' (1:3) of sanctified, 'set aside' people (1:2) with all of their frailties, failings and foibles. This created an environment of 'contrasts' between the Holy standards of their new found calling (1:2) and those of their former ways (1:26). These contrasts can be considered under three headers:

Firstly: Wisdom vs Foolishness: 17-25:

The fellowship at Corinth was made up of a mixed and varied folk; some will have been converted from the synagogue (Acts 18:8), others from the gentile population. This created a people coming together with mixed values and emphasis. Some would be into philosophy, others would be from Judaism, with still others following the latest 'sophia' or wisdom of the day (Sophists). It would be natural for these folk to assess everything they now experienced in 'church life', against these flawed ideals. There would be pressure and criticism from friends and family who still held to the ideals and philosophies of their traditions; whom to them, the cross was 'foolishness' (1:18).

The status of Paul himself as an Apostle, was often under scrutiny; thus he would often defend his divine calling and purpose (9:1). However, Paul from the outset, reminds the people that when he preached to them it was, 'not with words of human wisdom' (1:17). God's glorious Gospel is contrary to the wisdom of men; His ways are not theirs (Isaiah 55:8). Yet paraphrasing Isaiah 29:14, Paul reminds the people of a history of contrasting wisdom and spiritual blindness (1:19). The Apostle then challenges those who would profess worldly wisdom; categorising them into three groups. The 'wise man', 'the scholar', 'the philosopher' (1:20). These categories transcend time, as opponents of the Gospel; those 'wise' in their own sight, those seeking God through 'pure religion', with others following the latest trends of human thought and philosophy.

So who can get to 'know God'?; Paul reminds the people that it is not those who follow religion, man's wisdom or philosophy but rather, 'those who believe' (1:21). The barriers to belief are outlined in verse 22. For the Jews, seeking a Messiah who would deliver them from their oppressors, they 'demanded a sign' (see also Matthew 12:38). For the Greeks, seeking wise, logical explanations, a crucified God was no god at all; their God's were powerful, worshipful conquerors. Thus 'Christ crucified' could be described by

the Apostle as, a 'stumbling block to the Jews' and 'foolishness to the Gentiles'; yet God's people are different, contrary to the expectation and demands of the world, 'we preach Christ crucified' (1:23). The Apostle summarises the contrast simply, 'for the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom' (1:25).

Second: Humility vs Pride: 26-31:

An additional barrier to spiritual progress is highlighted by the Apostle in these verses – that of pride. God 'opposes the proud' (James 4:6). Thus Paul reminds the buoyant Corinthians of where they had come from; their 'pre-Christ' state (1:26). Those of 'noble birth' or those who consider themselves 'influential' in human terms; often find it the most difficult to bend the knee to Christ; thus amongst the 'many who believed', 'not many' were from such groups. There needs to be a balance amongst God's people between new found confidence in our security in Him; and humble acknowledgment of our woeful past. In verses 27 & 28, Paul then gives a great summary of 'contrasts' between the world's standards and His – wise vs foolish, weak vs strong, lowly vs the exalted earthly things 'that are'. What is the reason for such a contrast? Verse 29, 'so that no-one may boast before Him'. Paul then concludes this section by reminding the people that it is not actually about them, it's about Him (1:30). There are things in Christ that are priceless, that money, wisdom, influence or any human attainment cannot buy – those of righteousness, holiness and redemption (1:30). Paraphrasing Jeremiah 9:24. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to give Him the glory and, 'let Him who boasts, boast in the Lord' (1:31).

Third: Those Perishing vs Those being saved – 1:18:

Although an earlier verse, verse 18 provides an apt summary for our considerations of 'contrasts'. For whatever wisdom or ideals we may or may not possess, the ultimate contrast the Apostle makes is between, 'those who are perishing' and 'those who are being saved' (1:18). Our approach, our acceptance or rejection of the Gospel, the wisdom of God, will dictate as to which group we fall into.

For further study:

"Wisdom" is something that each of us should ask for on an on-going basis – look up the following verses (and surrounding context where appropriate):

2 Chronicles 1:10, Ezra 7:25, Psalm 37:30, Acts 6:3, James 1:5

Further Reading/Bibliography:

*The Holy Bible, 1 Corinthians (Morris, Tyndale),
The Message of 1 Corinthians (Prior, IVP) 1 Corinthians, A Shorter Exegetical
& Pastoral Commentary (Thiselton, Eerdmans).
"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your Word" Psalm 119:18*