

## **Gospel Doctrine**

**Lesson: 1 Cor 1-6**

**Reading: 1 Cor 1-6**

PDF version of the lesson notes.

### **I. Introduction**

Today, we turn to Paul's first letter to the Corinthian saints. It might not really be Paul's first letter to the Corinthian saints but only the first surviving letter (see 1 Cor 5:9).

**Authorship:** Paul is the author of this epistle; it is considered authentic by most scholars.[1] I suppose that one could argue that Paul coauthored the letter with Sosthenes:

(1) Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother.

Like his letter to the Galatians, Paul points out that he writes a portion of the letter with his own hand:

(19) The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. (20) All the brethren greet you. Greet ye one another with an holy kiss. (21) The salutation of me Paul with mine own hand.

**Date Written:** Paul mentions that he wrote the letter from Ephesus in the spring (1 Cor 16:8). However, the year of composition is a little more difficult to pin down. Scholars have proposed a date range from 52 to 57.[2]

**The Recipients:** The recipients of the letter are the saints at the city of Corinth (a city in Greece). Corinth had a vital Jewish community by the early 1st century CE.[3] Corinth sometimes is referred to or depicted as "Sin City" but scholar, Jerome Murphy O'Conner, points out that this assertion, "has been shown to be totally devoid of foundation ... Corinth was no worse than any other Mediterranean port." [4]

### **II. Greeting and Thanksgiving**

Read 1 Cor 1:1-9:

1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, 2 Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: 3 Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; 5 That in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all

knowledge; 6 Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: 7 So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: 8 Who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

- What do you think of Paul's introduction and thanksgiving here? What does he emphasize in these verses?
- Paul mentions Jesus quite a few times explicitly in this pericope (in fact, would it be possible to pack any more explicit mentions into these verse?). Jesus is mentioned 8 times in 9 verses. Is this frequency important? What does it teach us about Paul? Does this have implications for us?
- Paul says he is writing to "them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus? What do you think sanctified means in this context? Does it mean "purified"? Does it mean "holy?" Does it mean that God has set them apart for his own special purposes?[5]
- What is verse 5 about? What does it mean that in "everything you are enriched by him?" How is it related to verse 4 and the concept of grace?
- Verse 6 mentions testimony. Is the word used in same way that latter-day saints typically use the term?

### **III. Conflict**

#### ***A. Nature of the Conflict***

Read 1 Cor 1:10-17:

10 Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

11 For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. 12 Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ.

13 Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; 15 Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name. 16 And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other. 17 For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.

- How would you describe or summarize the the conflict in Corinth? Can you think of modern analogues to this problem?
- Are you surprised that problems like these arose in early Christian congregations? What do these verses tell us about first century Christianity?
- Does 1 Cor 4:6-7 help provide some additional information about the nature of the conflict?

(6) And these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and to Apollos for your sakes; that ye might learn in us not to think of men above that which is written, that no one of you be puffed up for one against another. (7) For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?

- Is it about social divisions? Does 4:7 suggest the some were asserting that they had spiritual gifts that other in the congregations didn't?
- What do you think of Paul's rhetoric in 14-16? Does it seem a little bit mean (or is it quite understandable given the setting) for Paul to say he is glad that he didn't baptize any of them (except for a few people)?

## ***B. Wisdom***

What is verse 17 about? Paul says e is meant to preach or announce the gospel but not with words of wisdom. In fact, Paul indicates that doing so would rob the cross of its power. What does words of wisdom allude to in this context? What does it imply about the nature of Paul teaching?

NT Wright suggest the following backdrop for "wisdom" in Corinth:[6]

The relevant fact -- and here we get to the heart of it, as we shall see from now on -- was the clash between the good news, the gospel, of Jesus, and the apparent power of human wisdom. Here we need to know something about Corinth and its public life, which will be important as we proceed. Corinth had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC, and rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44 BC as a Roman colony. Since that time, about a hundred years before this letter was written, Corinth had prided itself on being a Roman city on Greek soil. It celebrated its Roman style of buildings, its Roman culture, its special links to the capital of a worldwide empire.

And it prided itself on its intellectual life ... In Paul's day, a city like Corinth would do that with visiting intellectual teachers, men with a reputation as philosophers, instructors in the theory and practice of wisdom. 'The whole town', or a good many of them, would turn out to listen to them speak, and everyone would discuss what they had to say.

One of the words for such people was 'sophists' ... Paul is about to launch an attack on such 'wisdom', and to show that you have to make a choice between the world's wisdom and the power of the Messiah's cross.

But the key point here is this: the 'sophists' who travelled around the ancient world were keen on making disciples for themselves, and their followers often quarrelled and scrapped among themselves as to which teacher was the greatest. Paul has realized, with the report from the family of Chloe, visiting him in Ephesus, that the Christians in Corinth have begun to treat him, Apollos, Peter, and even King Jesus himself, as a bunch of teachers to be played off against one another. And that is to miss the whole point.

- Does the preceding affect your understanding of the nature of the conflict?
- Does the preceding help you understand why Paul, in verse 17 mentions wisdom?

#### **IV. Foolishness of God**

Read 1 Cor 1:18-25:

18 For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written,:

I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.

20 Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? 21 For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. 22 For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: 23 But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; 24 But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

- This is an amazing paragraph. And strikes me as a bit humorous given that he displays such rhetorical force while decrying the wisdom of the world.
- Paul's contrasts the foolishness of God with the wisdom of the world. What does Paul mean by the foolishness of God? How do you understand the comparison?
- Why and how was the Messiah's death a stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to the Greeks? Is the foolishness related to the basic issue that the gospel message was about a convicted criminal from a despised race? [7] Is the reasoning similar for why gospel was a stumbling block to the Jews?

## V. In Christ Jesus

Read 1 Cor 1:26-31:

26 For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: 27 But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; 28 And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: 29 That no flesh should glory in his presence. 30 But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: 31 That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.

- What does it mean to be "in Christ Jesus?" What does being "in Christ Jesus" do?
- Paul quotes part of Jeremiah 9:24. However, looking at Jeremiah 9:23-24, do you think Paul quotes a small part of 24 as way to refer to the whole passage?

23 Thus saith the LORD,  
Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,  
neither let the mighty man glory in his might,  
let not the rich man glory in his riches:  
24 But let him that glorieth glory in this,  
that he understandeth and knoweth me,  
that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and  
righteousness, in the earth:  
for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.

How are these verses in Jeremiah related to Paul's argument?

## VII. Comparison: Feeding

I want to get to at least some of the material in chapter 3 so I am skipping most of chapter 2 (maybe next time). Read 1 Cor 2:14-3:4:

14 But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. 15 But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. 16 For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.

(1) And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. (2) I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. (3) For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye

not carnal, and walk as men? 4 For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?

Note, the reference to meat here is a more general reference to solid food. Thus, for example, the NRSV translates verse 2 as, "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready."

- Why does Paul use the milk versus meat metaphor? What does it emphasize? What does Paul mean when he says, "I ... could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ?"
- The milk versus meat metaphor is certainly one that resonates with the modern church (or at the very least I notice it being used relatively frequently). Do you think we use it in the same sense as Paul used it? What is Paul focusing on?
- What does Paul link with being carnal or "of the flesh?" Are the things Paul mentions in these verses the same that we usually associate with being carnal? What makes these things carnal and why would Paul bring these things to the forefront? What do these verses suggest about the contrast between "carnal" and "spiritual?"
- How are these verses linked with the end of chapter 2? Why does Paul talk about the workings of the Holy Ghost and then follow it up with the milk versus meat comments? Are they meant to contrast? Is he trying to puncture the pride of the Corinthian saints? Do these verses tell us something about the strife in the congregation? Is there irony or sarcasm that connects chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3?
- How are these verses related to Paul's discussion of wisdom earlier in the letter? How is related Paul's argument earlier in chapter 2? Do the earlier parts of the letter help us understand the milk versus meat metaphor better?

### **VIII. Comparison: Agriculture**

Read 1 Cor 3:5-9:

(5) Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? (6) I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. (7) So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. (8) Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. (9) For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building.

- What is Paul trying to tell the Corinthians about church leadership? Do you think his argument applies today?
- Why link the missionary work of Paul and others with an agricultural metaphor? What

does it emphasize about the role of the missionaries and the role of God?

- What is verse 9 all about? The NRSV translation of the verse may be helpful (see also, the footnote in the LDS edition of the King James bible for verse 9):

(9) For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field,  
God's building.

Who is the "ye" or the "you" in these verse? Is it plural or singular? Does it make a difference?

- Why mention a building when the main metaphor is about agriculture?

### **IX. Comparison: Construction**

Paul changes the metaphor in 9 and then builds around this new metaphor. Read 1 Cor 3:10-17:

(10) According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. (11) For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. (12) Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw? (13) the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. (14) If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. (15) If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire. (16) Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? (17) If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

- Are you surprised that Paul refers to himself as the master builder? Is he bragging? Or is there another reason why he emphasizes and describes himself as the master builder? What does it tell us about this building?
- Why is Christ the foundation and not the master builder? Why is Christ as the foundation an important part of the metaphor given the problems of the Corinthian church?
- What are verses 13-15 about? Do they refer to judgment of all people or does this have specific reference?
- How are verses 16-17 related to the rest of the chapter and this pericope in particular? Can we tell that the "you" is plural just from the context?
- According to Paul who is the temple of God? Is the temple metaphor here, in context, different than the way we usually apply or interpret this scripture?

- I think Paul's discussion here is beautiful. He builds this "building" metaphor about the congregation at Corinth, but he doesn't describe the building very much. We learn that Christ is the foundation and the missionaries built, but then Paul reveals that the building is the **Temple of God**. What should we learn from the idea that a congregation is a temple of God?
- How do these metaphors address the conflict that Paul outlined in chapter 1? How is it related to the discussion of wisdom earlier in the letter?

## X. Wisdom

- Read 1 Cor 3:18-23:

(18) Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. (19) For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," (20) and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." (21) So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, (22) whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future? all belong to you, (23) and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

- How are these verses related to the metaphors that proceed these verses?
- According to Paul, how is the wisdom of the world different from the wisdom of God?
- Why is leadership mentioned again?

## Endnotes

1. *Oxford Bible Commentary*, 1108.
2. *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, 798.
3. *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, 799.
4. *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, 790.
5. Wright, NT, Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians, 1-4.
6. Wright, NT, Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians, 9-10.
7. Wright, NT, Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians, 12.