

Climbing to the Bottom **1 Corinthians 2:6-16**

How deep in our human make-up is the desire to get to the top? Just how strong is that desire that wants to achieve more than the next guy?

- You see it very strongly on the sporting field, don't you? The whole idea of most sports – if not all sports – is to come out on top. The whole aim is to beat the opposition.
- You also see it in the business world – company competes with company for a bigger share of the market (like with the Angus burgers). Or individual competes with individual – the dog-eat-dog world where executives stab each other in the back, climbing over others on the way to the top.
- The way in which jobs are allocated – as potential applicants are compared with one another in the effort to find who is the best one for the job.
- The school system – where students are ranked with one another. Or with the schools website and all the fuss about ranking schools against one another.
- Even the local neighbourhood – the old saying of keeping up with the Joneses still has a lot going for it. People work out where they fit in the local pecking order.

Indeed, I suspect it's so much a way of life for us that it's very hard for us to imagine life any other way.

Sometimes these same comparisons creep into the church as well.

- Not simply the fact that church members, because they live in the same world as everyone else, face the same comparisons and competitions as every-

one else in that world.

- But also from the fact that they compare themselves with one another on a spiritual level.

Just as people play one-upmanship within various parts of society, so some Christians play spiritual one-upmanship within the church.

- I read my Bible more than you.
- I pray more than you.
- I pray with more authority than you.
- I go to a better church than you.
- I've had better spiritual experiences than you.
- I'm more spiritually mature than you.
- I'm more effective for God than you.
- I'm more loved by God than you.
- I'm more important to God than you.

As we've seen over the last two weeks, something like this went on in the church at Corinth. They played some form of spiritual one-upmanship in relation to the claims they made about their various leaders. I think it's important to remind ourselves that Paul writes against their one-upmanship as he deals with the quarrels among them. It's important to remind ourselves of that as we come to this next section, because some interpret this section as if it gives support to the concept of spiritual one-upmanship. There are two main interpretations of this section.

First Main Interpretation

The first one picks up on words such as *mature* (v.6) and *infants* (3:1) and *God's secret wisdom* (v.7). It also notes the contrast between *spiritual* and *worldly* (3:1) and *milk* and *solid food* (3:2). It claims Paul here distinguishes between different levels of Christians: there are the mere infants and the more mature, and possibly a few other

categories he doesn't mention here.

- The Corinthians are among the mere infants. Paul could only give them the basic Christian message. Because they didn't mature much, Paul couldn't go on to give them the really solid stuff – the secret wisdom and the deep things of God.
- These things are reserved for more mature Christians. Paul doesn't spell out exactly what these things are in this passage because the Corinthians weren't mature enough to handle them. However, those who follow this interpretation are quite prepared to tell you what these things are – because *they* belong to the more mature and *they* know the secret things.

I think this interpretation is wrong. It undermines Paul's whole argument in these opening chapters.

- The Corinthians have their various "parties" – the Paul party, the Apollos party, the Cephas party and the Christ party. People in the church joined these different "parties". They thought these parties were important. They boasted of their own party. They thought their own party exhibited superior wisdom to the others. These "parties" had a divisive effect.
- Paul tells them they're wrong. These "parties" are formed because people follow values that come from this world's wisdom. Now they're Christians, they should recognise that such wisdom isn't from God. God's wisdom has to do with the crucifixion of Jesus. There can be no different "parties" in the church. All come in on an equal basis.

That's what Paul's been arguing.

This interpretation says that, having just argued that, Paul

now turns round and contradicts himself. There are two different levels within the church (maybe more):

- There's the infants level – which understands the wisdom of the cross; and
- There's the mature level – which has progressed to receive a better, more secret, wisdom.

Personally, I can't see Paul contradicting himself in such a big way in the same passage.

And so, I prefer the second interpretation which sees these verses continuing the same theme. And I'll try to explain that as we look at each of the paragraphs in turn.

God's Secret Wisdom

So, we turn to the first paragraph – a paragraph that does indeed contain the phrase *God's secret wisdom* and speaks of *the mature*. Verse 6:

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written:

*"No eye has seen,
no ear has heard,
no mind has conceived
what God has prepared for those who love Him"
– but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit.*

One preliminary issue before we get to the main thrust of this paragraph: who are *the rulers of this age*? Many think of Satan and his demonic followers. That's poss-

ible. Certainly Paul refers to them with this sort of language elsewhere. However, I think the context here points in terms of earthly rulers. Paul argues against following worldly values and attitudes. Who demonstrates those values most? Is it not the worldly rulers – both at the political level and the intellectual level? And they were involved in Jesus' crucifixion. But I only mention that in passing. It's not overly important. If you disagree with me at that point, it doesn't effect the overall interpretation of this passage.

So let's look at the main thrust. Paul here contrasts two types of wisdom:

- God's secret wisdom; and
- The wisdom of this age and the rulers of this age.

Does that ring any bells? It should remind you of last week's passage. For there also Paul contrasted two types of wisdom:

- The wisdom of God – which was the message of Christ crucified; and
- The wisdom of this world – which focused on Jews looking for miraculous signs and Greeks looking for wisdom.

Is there any reason to think Paul changes subject? Is he making a totally new contrast, or is he just continuing the contrast he makes back there?

Quite apart from maintaining the continuity of what Paul writes, I think there are four further reasons to suggest this message of wisdom still focuses on Christ crucified:

- First, it's still contrasted with the wisdom of this age. Paul doesn't contrast it with the wisdom he gives baby Christians. That is, Paul doesn't make a new contrast, but rather repeats the same contrast.

- Secondly, the word translated *secret* in verse 7 is more usually translated *mystery*. The mystery is to do with God's eternal plans of salvation. It's something hidden in the past, but which is now revealed. It was previously unknown because it was hidden – but there's nothing unknown about it any more. It's now made known clearly to everyone hearing the gospel. It's to do with people from all nations – both Jew and Gentile – being brought together in the church through Jesus' death.
- Thirdly, in verse 8 Paul seems to identify this wisdom with the crucifixion of *the Lord of glory* (Jesus). That is, he still talks about the wisdom of God being *Christ crucified*. That's the content of the wisdom he speaks about.
- Fourthly, Paul uses inclusive language in this paragraph: verse 7 speaks of *our* glory; verse 10 states it's revealed to *us*. He doesn't exclude the Corinthians from this *secret* wisdom.

Why then does Paul use the word *mature*? I think it's a Corinthian word. They claimed to be mature in their understanding of Christian things. On the basis of the world's wisdom, they claimed they'd reached a higher level of Christian existence. Later in this letter there's even some hint they thought themselves more *spiritual* than Paul. And so Paul uses their word *mature* – and thus makes two points:

- The mature are those who give up on the world's wisdom and accept the foolishness of God's wisdom. The mature are those who become Christians by recognising they can't reach God by the methods of this world's wisdom – but in the cross they receive the power and wisdom of God.

- Secondly, he hints that the Corinthians themselves aren't mature – not because they failed to attain some additional secret knowledge, but because they failed to fully embrace God's wisdom and abandon the world's wisdom. They tried to add the world's wisdom to the cross. They received the message of the cross but they didn't allow that to overturn their worldly values and thinking. They were spiritual and worldly at the same time.

The Corinthians heard the gospel – the message of Jesus crucified for their sins. They accepted that message. They accepted God's wisdom. But they also, it seems, still value human wisdom and chase after it. Paul encourages them to give it up:

- The wisdom of this age and those who follow it are coming to nothing (v.6).
- The wisdom of this age is in sharp contrast to God's wisdom (v.7).
- The wisdom of this age led the rulers of this age to crucify Jesus (v.8).

Having left that wisdom behind, why do you want to go back to it?

Knowing God's Secret Wisdom

There is one level at which God's wisdom remains *hidden* or *secret* – and Paul deals with that in the next paragraph. God's wisdom isn't hidden from Christians, but it seems to remain hidden from non-Christians. Why? Simply because they don't have the Spirit of God and it's God's Spirit who reveals God's wisdom to us.

How do you know the thoughts of a man? Look at Jon sitting there. What's he thinking? I can have a few

guesses.

- I hope he's thinking about the sermon and following the marvellous logic of my presentation.
- But then again, he may not be thinking about the sermon at all. Inwardly his mind could be in all sorts of different places – tonight's movie, the book he's reading, his family, his wife, school.

I haven't got a clue what he's thinking about. I can guess on the basis of his external circumstances, but those guesses may be miles off. Jon knows what he's thinking – but the only way I can know for sure is if he opens his mouth and tells me.

Have you ever had someone tell you they know what you're thinking and they're way off-beam? How easy is it to persuade them they're wrong? They simply know and they're sure they're right. The only option is to lie and agree with them.

Paul disagrees.

Who among men know the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him?

The only way you can know a person's thoughts is if that person reveals them to you. So also with God – the only way you can know God's thoughts is if God reveals them to you. And that, says Paul, is what happened if you're a Christian.

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.

This is why we Christians know God's wisdom and why non-Christians don't – we have God's Spirit.

Now, this must be kept very much in context – for some people use these verses in all sorts of weird ways. The issue Paul deals with is understanding God's wisdom as it's revealed in the gospel – in Jesus' crucifixion. That's what God *has freely given us*. How does a person understand that wisdom of God?

- Does a person understand it by following the world's wisdom? No. We saw last week that Paul claims no one following world's wisdom will get to the message of the cross. The message of the cross simply cuts across all the categories of human wisdom.
- The only way you get to understand God's wisdom is by being given God's Spirit. It's God's Spirit who reveals God's wisdom to people.

So why do they want to go back to the world's wisdom?

Having God's Secret Wisdom

Paul draws the natural conclusion in verse 14:

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment:

"For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?"

But we have the mind of Christ.

Who's the person *without the Spirit* of God? That's the non-Christian. That's quite standard in the New Testament. So what's the non-Christian like? Three things Paul says of him/her:

- First, he/she doesn't accept the things that come

from the Spirit of God.

- Secondly, those things are foolishness to him/her.
- Thirdly, he/she can't understand them.

They're three separate statements, but basically all three say the same thing. Then the reason is given: because they're spiritually discerned and the non-Christian doesn't have God's Spirit to be able to discern them.

The non-Christian is still in the categories of chapter 1. They still operate on the basis of this world's wisdom:

- Jews demand miraculous signs; and
- Greeks demand wisdom.

God, however, operates on a different level – as we've seen. God cuts across these worldly values and replaces them with His own wisdom, namely, the cross. But God's wisdom remains foolishness to the non-Christian. He/she simply can't understand it. It doesn't make sense to him/her – and so he/she rejects it. At the same time, the non-Christian also rejects the Christian who accepts God's wisdom.

On the other hand, the spiritual man (in verse 15) – the Christian – *makes judgments about all things*. Three important points to make about this verse:

- First, the spiritual man (in this context) isn't some smaller group within the wider group of Christians. Paul talks here about the *spiritual man* in contrast with *the man without the Spirit*. The contrast is between Christians and non-Christians.
- Secondly, the *all things* refers, in the context, to God's hidden wisdom now revealed to those being saved. It's a judgment made from the perspective of the gospel – evaluating life and the decisions of life on the basis of God's wisdom revealed in the cross.

It doesn't mean Christians can automatically make decisions about heart operations and buying shares.

- Thirdly, the *any man* to whose judgment the Christian is not subject is any non-Christian. The non-Christian (whether male or female) simply doesn't have the proper basis to judge the Christian perspective – because he/she doesn't have the Spirit of God and still operates on the basis of the world's wisdom.

This verse has been misused by some people. The verse isn't talking about some spiritually elite group of Christians who are above being judged by other Christians. Nor is it saying that Christians can't be judged by one another. In chapter 5, Paul will tell them they should be judging the church member sleeping with his mother-in-law. They should expel him from the church. It simply refers to the fact that non-Christians aren't qualified to judge Christians.

Conclusion

So what of those who give the impression that they're the spiritual elite? What of those who give the impression they have secret wisdom from God not available to everyday Christians? It comes back to us really. They can only do that while we are into the comparing game. If we think they have something important that we don't have:

- Some knowledge
- Some secret
- Some spiritual gift
- Some ability

Then we're open to thinking we're only second-class Christians – inferior, sub-standard, looking for something

extra to make us a class above the ordinary. We need to come back to the gospel and allow it to truly sink in. The cross is God's wisdom. You never get beyond that. In Christ, we're blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. God has given us it all.

I want to close tonight with a lengthy quote from Gordon Fee – because I think he sums it up well:

This paragraph has endured a most unfortunate history of application in the church. Paul's own point has been almost totally lost in favour of an interpretation nearly 180 degrees the opposite of his intent. Almost every form of spiritual elitism, "deeper life" movement, and "Second blessing" doctrine has appealed to this text. To receive the Spirit according to their special expression paves the way for people to know "deeper truths" about God. One special brand of this elitism surfaces among some who have pushed the possibilities of "faith" to the extreme, and regularly make a "special revelation" from the Spirit their final court of appeal. Other "lesser" brothers and sisters are simply living below their full privileges in Christ. Indeed, some advocates of this form of spirituality bid fair to repeat the Corinthian error in its totality. What is painful about so much of this is not simply the improper use of this passage, but that so often it is accompanied by a toning down of the message of the cross. In fact one is hard-pressed to hear the content of "God's wisdom" ever expounded as the paradigm for truly Christian living.

Paul's concern needs to be resurrected throughout the church. The gift of the Spirit does not lead to special status among believers; rather, it leads to special status vis-à-vis the world. But it should do so always in

terms of the centrality of the message of our crucified/risen Saviour. The Spirit should identify God's people in such a way that their values and worldview are radically different from the wisdom of this age. They do know what God is about in Christ; they do live out the life of the future in the present age that is passing away; they are marked by the cross forever. As such they are the people of the Spirit, who stand in bold contrast to those who are merely human and do not understand the scandal of the cross. Being spiritual does not lead to elitism; it leads to a deeper understanding of God's profound mystery – redemption through a crucified Messiah.

Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 120