

Corinth: Why Can't God be as Smart as Us?

Thomas Robinson, Cities of Hope 7, July 24, 2016

1 Corinthians 1:10-31

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, through the name of our Lord Jesus Messiah, that all of you **speak the same thing**, and that there be **no splits** among you, but that you **be fitted together** in **the same mind** and **the same conviction**. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is **discord** among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹² What I mean is that each of you says, "**I'm with Paul**," or "**I'm with Apollos**," [Act 18:24-19:1] or "**I'm with Cephas**," [1Cor 9:5] or "**I'm with Messiah**."

¹³ **Is the Messiah divided?! Was Paul crucified for you?** Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus [Act 18:8] and Gaius [Rom 16:23], ¹⁵ so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ I did also baptize the household of Stephanas [1Cor 16:15]. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.

¹⁷ For Messiah did not send me to baptize but to **announce the Good News**, and **not in a wisdom of word, lest the cross of the Messiah be emptied out**.

¹⁸ For the **word of the cross** is **foolishness** to those who are perishing, but to us who are being delivered it is **God's power**. ¹⁹ For it is written,

*"I will cause the **wisdom of the wise sages** to perish,
and the **discernment of the discerning** I will declare void."* [Isa 29:14]

²⁰ Where is a wise sage? Where is a scholar? Where is a debater of this age? Did not **God** show the **wisdom of the world** to be **foolish**? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, **the world did not know God** through its wisdom, **God was pleased through the foolishness of what we proclaim to save those who put their trust in it**.

²² For **Jews** are asking for **signs** and **Greeks** are seeking **wisdom**, ²³ but **we are proclaiming a crucified Messiah**, to Jews, a **scandal**, and to Gentiles, **foolishness**, ²⁴ but to those who are **called**, both **Jews** and **Greeks**, a **Messiah** who is **God's power** and **God's wisdom**. ²⁵ For the **foolish thing that belongs to God** is **wiser** than humans, and **God's weak thing** is **stronger** than humans.

²⁶ For consider **your own calling**, brothers and sisters. **Not many** of you are wise sages according to flesh, **not many** powerful, **not many** aristocratic. ²⁷ But **God chose** what is **foolish** according to the world in order to shame the wise; **God chose** what is **weak** according to the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ **God chose** things **ignoble** in the world, even things **despised**; **he chose things that don't exist, to render powerless the things that are**, ²⁹ so that nothing defined by flesh may boast in the presence of God.

³⁰ But from him **you exist in Messiah Jesus**, who **from God** became **Wisdom** for us, and **Righteousness** and **Holiness** for God and **Deliverance** from slavery, ³¹ so that, as it is written,

*"Let the one who boasts, **boast in the Lord**."* [Jer 9:24]

Acts 18:1-5, 8-11 In Corinth, Paul proclaims the Message of Jesus as Messiah.

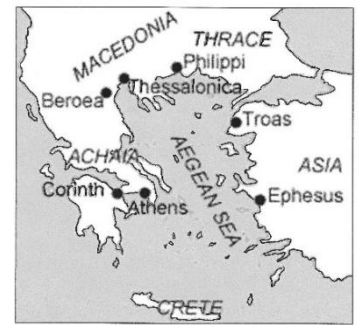
¹ Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome [ad 49]. And he went to see them, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. ⁵ When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus. ...

⁸ 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. ⁹ And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ for I am with you, ... I have many people in this city." ¹¹ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

Philippians 2:5-11 Paul summarizes the Word of the Cross.

⁵ Think this among yourselves, which also means in Messiah Jesus, ⁶ who: Though he was in the form of God, | he did not consider that equality with God | a thing to be exploited, | ⁷ rather he emptied himself, | by taking the form of a slave, | being born in human likeness. | ⁸ And being found in human shape, | he humbled himself | by becoming obedient to the point of death, | even death on a cross. | |

⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him | and graced him with the name | that is above every name, | ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus | every knee should bow, | of those in heaven and on earth and under earth, | ¹¹ and every tongue confess | that "Jesus Messiah is LORD," | to the glory of God the Father.



Paul in Corinth – a Cultural Crossroads

Corinth a “new” Roman colony; destroyed in 146 bc, rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44 bc. In ad 50, 94 yrs later, Paul arrives. Strong Jewish community. Jews expelled from Rome by Claudius in ad 48. Paul stays 18 mo. growing a complex community of Jews, god-fearers, pagans, etc. – dynamic, lives changed, new experiences, under persecution. Paul moves on: Galatia, Ephesus. Paul learns about believers in Corinth, receives a letter of inquiries from them: writes 1 Corinthians in ad 54. A community transformed by the Gospel and power of the Spirit but living in the social, cultural, political world of Greece and Rome. In 1Cor Paul deals with a variety of serious problems as they try to live into this new reality but are drawn back into old/common/pervasive ways of thinking. Paul starts from a basic symptom that reveals the problem: conflict, competition, groups around various teachers. Common from both teachers and learners. Natural in complex communities. So what’s the problem? Get along. Competition among groups leads to clearer thinking—advance. Those with Greek education are going to have different perspective than Jews reading the Torah. It’s obvious, natural and real. A community that brings together different ethnic groups, cultures, social classes is going to have competing points of view. It’s more of a virtue than a problem.

The Dangerous Idea of Unity

But Paul says that natural tendency blocks from view a deeper reality that is the heart of what God has done in Jesus. He is well aware of cultural and ethnic diversity (Jew/Greek; slave/free). Even the small, persecuted community of believers lives within the power struggles and identity struggles of the larger society, ultimately shaped by the culture and veiled violence of Rome. That shared vision of reality shapes how everyone thinks even in their conflicts with each other. But the “Good News” that Paul proclaimed was that God had planted in the middle of that very human understanding of how life works a sign that things are actually radically different. In Jesus’ life, teaching, death on a cross, and resurrection, God says that the deep reality that endures, God’s self-giving love, is so different that it is scandalous and foolish to smart people. Paul challenges all groups in Corinth to focus on that reality – the event of God in Jesus the Messiah on a Roman cross – the Word/Message/Way of thinking of the Cross. The Cross is the lens by which the entire value structure of our violent, divided world is seen as distorted and false. Paul say let that event unite your words, relationships. Only it can create a new united humanity.

Where is the Expert on the Cross?

But the wisdom of the world is real. It really is the way we make our world work. The Cross says that it is transient, but it’s here now. It remakes everything in its competitive image. The cross, baptism, all get coopted. The cross is vulnerable. It can be emptied. God chooses vulnerability! No one can be a wise sage about the cross. It challenges every person, every system. We have wisdom, aristocracy. What doesn’t exist is human life in God, in God’s Messiah Jesus, in God’s Spirit. God creates that new reality in all kinds of people. A new world emerges, new humanity.