

1 CORINTHIANS

5) "We preach Christ crucified"

Read Chapter 1: 18-31

As we have already noted, in the former part of the epistle Paul addresses two dangers which had arisen at Corinth:

- ***The cliques among them, chs.1-4.*** "It hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren...that there are contentions among you. 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" (1: 11-12).

- ***The immorality among them, chs.5-6.*** "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife" (5: 1).

In dealing with the first of these, Paul highlights the sad spiritual results, "there is among you envying and strife, and divisions" (3: 3-4), and goes on to say "Therefore let no man glory in men..." (3: 31). Paul's object in Chapters 1-4 is to demonstrate that the believers at Corinth had no reason to "glory in men", and every reason to "glory in the Lord" (1: 31). Only then could they "all speak the same thing", and be "perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1: 10). He undertakes this in four ways:

- ***He reminds them that the way in which they had been saved,*** and the type of people who are saved, gave no reason to glory in men (1: 18-31).

- ***He reminds them that the way in which he preached at Corinth,*** and the manner in which he taught them after they were saved, gave no reason to glory in men (2: 1-16).

- ***He reminds them that the manner in which the assembly at Corinth had been planted*** left no reason to glory in men (3: 1-11).

- ***He reminds them that the assessment of God's servants must be left to the judgment seat of Christ*** (4: 1-6):

"Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come" (v.5). Having said, "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers ('servants') of Christ"(v.1), Paul continues, "that ye may learn in us not to think of men above that which is written" (v.6). By 'glorying in men' ("I am of Paul...of Apollos...of Cephas...") and in some cases going further by saying "I am of Christ", the believers at Corinth were proudly saying that they had the ability to assess servants of God, something only the Lord himself could accomplish.

Bearing in mind then that Paul sets out to demonstrate that the believers at Corinth had no reason to "glory in men" (3: 21), and every reason to "glory in the Lord" (1: 31), he now reminds them of the preaching under which they were saved (vv.18-25) and the kind of people who are saved (vv.26-31). Most certainly, neither gave ground for any at Corinth to say "I am of Paul". What wisdom in both cases! In the first case, Paul refers to "us that are **saved**" (v.18), and in the second, "unto them which are **called**" (v.24), and in this connection he refers to their divine "calling" (v.26) and divine choice ("chosen", vv.27-28).

1) THE WISDOM OF GOD IN THEIR SALVATION, vv.18-25

It should be noted that in speaking about the death of Christ, Paul emphasises His crucifixion. He refers to the "cross of Christ" (v.17); to "the preaching of the cross" (v.18); to "Christ crucified" (v.23). Men "crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2: 8). He was "taken, and by wicked hands...crucified and slain" (Acts 2: 23). The 'death of Christ' is the basis of our relationship with God, and "the cross of Christ" is the basis of our relationship with the world: "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal. 6: 14). Paul is therefore explaining that "the cross of Christ", which condemns worldly wisdom (salvation comes – just think of it – through a Man who was crucified!), should turn believers away from all forms of human glory, including glorying in men ("I am of Paul...of Apollos...of Cephas").

These verses (vv.18-25) refer **(a)** to mankind generally (vv.18-21); **(b)** to Jew and Gentile particularly (vv.22-25). In the first case, where Paul speaks **generally**, he refers to "the world" (vv.20, 21) which is divided into two classes: "them that perish...us which are saved". In the second case, where Paul speaks **particularly**, he refers to three divisions: "the Jews...the Greeks...them that are called, both Jews and Greeks".

a) Mankind generally, vv.18-21

We should notice the following: **(i)** the preaching of the cross divides men (v.18); **(ii)** the preaching of the cross was determined beforehand (v.19); **(iii)** the preaching of the cross destroys human wisdom (v.20); **(iv)** the preaching of the cross delivers salvation (v.21).

i) The preaching of the cross divides men, v.18. "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness (meaning 'stupid...silly...worthless', W.E.Vine), but unto us which are saved it is the power of God". Men say that "the preaching of the cross is foolishness", but God says that anything but the preaching of the cross is foolishness! (vv.20-21). The "preaching of the cross" divides humanity. Paul makes the point again in vv.23-24 where he emphasises that "the preaching of the cross" was a "stumblingblock" and "foolishness" to Jew and Gentile respectively, but "the power of God, and the wisdom of God" to "them which are called, both Jews and Greeks".

The words, "the preaching of the cross" are, literally, "the word (*logos*) of the cross" (JND) or "the word which [speaks] of the cross" (JND margin). W.E.Vine and others point out that "it is not the act of preaching, but the substance of the testimony, all that God had made known concerning the subject". The tenses employed, "them that perish...us which are saved" indicate 'work in progress', so that Paul refers here to those who are perishing ('the perishing', W.E.Vine) and those who are being saved. He emphasises the ultimate destination of both sections of humanity.

It is worth noticing that instead of saying 'unto us which are saved it is the *wisdom* of God', which would have been the natural antithesis to "foolishness", Paul says "unto us which are saved it is the *power* (*dunamis*) of God", which J.Hunter delightfully describes as "the mighty saving dynamic of the message". As Leon Morris observes, "It is not simply good advice to men, telling them what they should do. Nor is it a message about God's power. It *is* God's power". Compare Romans 1: 16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power (*dunamis*) of God unto salvation..."

ii) The preaching of the cross was determined beforehand, v.19. "For it is written, I will destroy (*appolumai*, not extinguishing, but ruining) the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing (*atheteo*, set aside) the understanding of the prudent". As Leon Morris observes,

"The principle Paul is expounding is nothing new". The apostle refers here to Isaiah 29: 14: "Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid". The passage refers to God's use of Sennacherib in bringing judgment on Jerusalem. Judah sought help, not from the Lord, but from Egypt (Isaiah 30: 1-2). But the wisdom of men in this way would fail when God stretched out His hand and "both he that helpeth shall fail, and he that is holpen shall fall down, and they shall all fall together" (Isaiah 31: 3). Only then, when the folly of human wisdom was exposed, would God intervene to save His people (Isaiah 31: 4-5). Man's wisdom cannot accomplish salvation: that can only be accomplished by the power of God through the preaching of the cross.

iii) *The preaching of the cross destroys human wisdom, v.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?" God had announced that He would "destroy the wisdom of the wise, and...bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent" (v.19), and He had duly fulfilled His promise. He is "God, that cannot lie (Titus 1: 2). He fulfilled His promise through "the foolishness of preaching".

The first occurrence in the verse of the word "world" ("the disputer of this world" or 'age'), refers to a period of time (*aion*), in this case to the present period of time marked by darkness. See Ephesians 6: 12. The second occurrence of "world" ("the wisdom of this world") denotes human affairs (*kosmos*). It occurs again in v.21 ("the world by wisdom knew not God"). It does seem that in referring to "the wise...the scribe...the disputer", Paul is speaking generally about "those who are learned and acute as the world counts wisdom" (Leon Morris). According to J.Hunter, "'Wise' refers to one versed in philosophical ideas; 'scribe' to one who is versed in literature; 'disputer' to one versed in intellectual discussions".

iv) *The preaching of the cross delivers salvation, v.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". It was never God's purpose to save men by their own wisdom, but to save them through the Gospel: "the foolishness of **the** preaching (*kerugma*, a proclamation by a herald)" (JND). Once again, W.E.Vine explains that Paul refers here to "the substance of what is preached as distinct from the act of preaching". In passing, we should notice that the words "the world by wisdom knew not God" explain that Paul is

not speaking here about human wisdom in general, but about human wisdom in seeking and knowing God.

Most certainly, "the world by wisdom knew not God". In fact, the reverse is true: "professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Rom. 1: 22). Romans 1 refers to God's revelation of Himself in creation (vv.19-20), and continues by telling us what men have made of it (vv.21-22). The "Athenians and strangers which were there, spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing...", but Paul still found "an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD" (Acts 17: 21, 23). Men are "ever learning, and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 3: 7).

But why does Paul say, "after that in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom knew not God?" If otherwise, it would have given men reason to congratulate themselves on their achievement, but in any case, how could sinful man ever know God? How glad we are that God has "devised means that his banished be not expelled from him" (2 Sam. 14: 15). Human wisdom can never discern God, causing Zophar to say, "Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?" (Job 11: 7). Again, if God could be known by human wisdom, then only the wise would ever know Him. The knowledge of God would be limited to them alone. This brings us to:

b) Jew and Gentile particularly, vv.22-25

These verses repeat and expand what has been said in the preceding verses. If in v.18 the preaching of the cross brings about the watershed of all men, then in vv.22-24 it brings about the watershed for Jew and Gentile. If in v.21 it is "them that believe" then in v.22 we have the Jews requiring a sign before they will believe, and the Greeks requiring a logical proposition before they will believe.

It could be said that the mind-set of Jew and Greek here, "For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom" (v.22), explains why Paul states that "the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness" (v.18). He refers to "the Jews" and "the Greeks" three times in these verses. His teaching may be summarised as follows: **(i)** their common demand (v.22); **(ii)** their common refusal (v.23); **(iii)** their common salvation (v.24).

i) Their common demand, v.22. Both wanted confirmation: "for the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom": a confirming sign in one case, and confirming logic in the other other.

- ***"The Jews require a sign"***. (Compare Psalm 74: 9). Leon Morris explains this well: "They thought of God as manifesting Himself in history in signs and mighty wonders. In the light of this they demanded a sign from the Lord Jesus." Hence we read: "Master, we would see a sign from thee" (Matt. 12: 38); "And the Pharisees came forth, and began to question with him, seeking of him a sign from heaven, tempting him" (Mark 8: 11); "What sign sheweth thou then that we may see, and believe thee? What dost thou work?" (John 6: 30). To them, a crucified Messiah was a contradiction in terms.

- ***"The Greeks seek after wisdom"***. That is, rational evidence. The Greeks were proud of their wisdom, and of their celebrated thinkers and philosophers. To them a crucified Saviour was totally illogical. It defied their wisdom.

ii) Their common refusal, v.23. "But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks ('nations', JND) foolishness".

- ***"Unto the Jews a stumblingblock"***. The word "stumblingblock (*skandalon*) means 'an occasion of offence'. To the Jews a crucified Messiah was a total impossibility. The Jews anticipated a victorious Messiah and a visible kingdom established in power. The cross was the antithesis of all this and completely unacceptable. A Messiah like this could never achieve their ideals. "To present to them one crucified as a malefactor as their Messiah was the greatest possible insult" (Charles Hodge). Paul uses the word *skandalon* again in Galatians 5: 11 ("the offence of the cross"), and Peter follows suit in 1 Peter 2: 8 ("a stone of stumbling"). But, notwithstanding Jewish reaction in this way, Paul says, "But we preach Christ crucified..."

- ***"Unto the Greeks foolishness"***. To the Greeks ('Gentiles', RV) salvation through a crucified man was totally illogical. It was foolishness. But, notwithstanding Gentile reaction in this way, Paul says, "But we preach Christ crucified..."

The unfavourable response to his preaching did not bring him to a grinding halt. He continued preaching. He was, in his own words "instant in season, out of season" (2 Tim. 4: 2). At Corinth, he "testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ" (Acts 18: 5) and "continued there a year and six months teaching the word of God among them, even though the Jews "opposed and spoke injuriously" (Acts 18: 6, JND).

In the circumstances, we might ask 'why preach at all?' The answer follows: both Jews and Greeks had been saved! This brings us to:

iii) *Their common salvation, v.24* "But unto them which are called, both Jew and Greek, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God". In passing, we should notice that men and women at Corinth were divided into three groups, "the Jews...the Gentiles...the church of God" (1 Cor. 10: 32).

The words "them which are called" refer to what is often called 'the effectual calling' of God. While at Corinth Paul was told, "Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace...for I have much people in this city" (Acts 18: 9-10). The people in question were not yet saved. The Jews "required a sign". They sought an exhibition of divine power before they would believe, not knowing that "Christ crucified" is "the power of God". The "Greeks seek after wisdom, not knowing that "Christ crucified" is "the wisdom of God", but not "the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world" (1 Cor. 2: 6). He is the complete reverse of human opinion. As Leon Morris observes, "The sign-seeking Jews were blind to the greatest sign of all when it was before them. The wisdom-loving Greeks could not discern the most profound wisdom of all when they were confronted with it". What seemed to them as utterly foolish and utterly weak - after all, could there be anything so foolish and so weak as salvation though a crucified man - was stronger than anything man could ever produce or provide. Just think of it: the "preaching of the cross" has resulted in the formation of "the church of God which is at Corinth!"

Having listened to Paul's teaching on the wisdom in their salvation (vv.18-25), we now come to:

2) THE WISDOM OF GOD IN THEIR CALLING, vv.26-31

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate yet again how wrong the saints at Corinth were to "glory in men". Their salvation exhibited divine wisdom, and so did their calling.

These verses may be divided as follows: **(a)** their own insignificance, leading to a conclusion (vv.26-29); **(b)** their enrichment in Christ, leading to a conclusion (vv.30-31).

a) *Their own insignificance, vv.26-29*

"For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called" (v.26). The word "calling" here refers, not so much to election, but to God's deliberate choice in calling, in the main, common-place men and women, so demonstrating that human wisdom and glory are not advantageous when it comes to salvation and spiritual life. He has chosen people who, having no human attainments, know themselves to be nothing. It has been suggested that the membership of New Testament churches was largely made up of converted slaves. Paul asks the believers at Corinth to take a good look at themselves. There was nothing in them that called for special treatment. They could not sit in their assembly meetings congratulating themselves on the fact that it was their wisdom and elevated status in life that made them the subjects of divine choice!

We should notice that the words, "not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called", imply - none the less - that there were **some**. The Countess of Huntingdon, a member of the English aristocracy (and a thorough evangelical) is said to have remarked that she was glad that Paul did not say 'not **any** noble, are called!' The overall point is clear: God does not take account of natural attainments and human refinement in blessing men and women. "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; 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" (vv.26-28). We should notice the 'pairing' in these verses:

i) "Not many wise men after the flesh" (v.26), but "*the foolish things of the world to confound the wise*" (v.27). The neuter is used here ("things"), emphasising not so much the individuals themselves, but their qualities. While the words "of the world" (v.27) could mean 'in the world's estimate', it may well be that Paul is referring to those who really are the *foolish* and the *weak* of this world" (Leon Morris). The word "confound" means to put to shame. Hence, when "they (the Jewish leadership) perceived that they (Peter and John) were unlearned and ignorant men", they "marvelled" (Acts 4: 13). As Leon Morris observes, this did not "come about because the only people who would interest themselves in Christianity were the depressed classes. It came about because God chose to work His

marvels through people who were, from the human point of view, the most unpromising".

ii) "Not many mighty" (v.26) but **"the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty"** (v.27). "Mighty" is "a general term for principal people" (Leon Morris). It has been nicely said that "Under the control of God ordinary instruments become extraordinary".

iii) "Not many noble" (v.26) but **"the base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen"** (v 28). The word "noble" applies to family and denotes noble rank. The word "base" means ignoble - of low birth. The word "despised" means to regard as nothing: to treat with contempt. See, for example, the proud Pharisee's prayer: "even as this publican" (Luke 18: 11). Paul then adds to the above:

iv) "And things which are not, to bring to nought things that are", v.28. The words, "things which are not" mean 'nonentities', and "bring to nought" mean to render inoperative. If "things which are despised" refers to things which 'are treated of no account', then "things which are not" is even stronger. "God's activity in men is creative. He takes that which is nothing at all and makes of it what He pleases" (Leon Morris).

Why does Paul say all this? The answer lies in his conclusion: "that no flesh should glory in his presence". And the believers at Corinth were doing just that: "I am of Paul...Apollos...Cephas...Christ"

b) Our enrichment in Christ, vv30-31

"But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" or "But of him are ye in Christ Jesus who has been made to us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and holiness, and redemption" (JND). Our new life derives from God, and it is made good to us in Christ. It certainly does not come from men, or through men.

According to Leon Morris, the Greek text seems to suggest that "righteousness... sanctification...redemption" are subordinate to "wisdom" and an explanation of it. If so, then we might say that God's wisdom has been expressed in three ways: as to the past, in our **justification** (righteousness before God); as to the present, in our

sanctification; as to the future, in the completion of God's purpose for us in final **redemption**.

However, for the purpose of this study, we will take "wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" in their AV setting, and listen to Harry Bell, late of Jarrow-on-Tyne, who likened these verses to a tour of Corinth.

i) When he was taken to the **university** of Corinth, Paul said '**Christ is made unto us wisdom**'. What sort of wisdom? Not human wisdom: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise" (v19); "for after that in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching (not the act of preaching, but the content of the preaching) to save them that believe" (v21); "Christ crucified...the power of God and the wisdom of God" (vv.23-24).

ii) When he was taken to the **courts** at Corinth, Paul said, '**Christ is made unto us righteousness**'. Paul addresses this great subject elsewhere in his New Testament correspondence. For example, "Now we know, that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them that are under the law; that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ, unto all and upon all them that believe" (Rom. 3: 19-22); "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made (become) the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5: 21).

iii) When he was taken to the **temple** at Corinth, Paul said, '**Christ is made unto us sanctification**'. The temple at Corinth was a vile place, but the assembly at Corinth is described as a holy temple; "the temple of God is **holy** (separated to God), which temple ye are" (1 Cor. 3: 17). As we have noticed, the epistle is addressed to the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are **sanctified** in Christ Jesus, called (to be) saints" (1 Cor. 1: 2). Paul told the believers at Ephesus that "Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might **sanctify** and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word" (Eph. 5: 25-26).

iv) When he was taken to the **slave-market** at Corinth, Paul said, '**Christ is made unto us redemption**'. The word "redemption" (*apolutrosis*) means to release on payment of a ransom. The Lord

Jesus, "by his own blood...entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal **redemption** (*lutrosis*) for us" (Heb. 9: 12); He "gave himself for us that he might **redeem** (*lutroo*) us from all iniquity" (Titus 2: 14); we are "not **redeemed** (*lutroo*) with corruptible things as silver and gold...but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1: 18).

If, after vv.26-28, Paul concluded "that no flesh should glory in his presence", now, after v.30, he concludes, "That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord". Certainly, "let no man glory in men" (3: 21). Not in Paul...Apollos...Cephas. We are indebted to **the Lord** for everything. This was God's settled purpose, and Paul takes his supporting text from the prophecy of Jeremiah. Here is the complete passage: "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: 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" (Jer. 9: 23-24).

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