



**FIRST
CORINTHIANS**

.....
**JOHN P.
SCHARLEMANN**

**LIVING WAY
BIBLE STUDY**

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Our purpose is to help equip believers to live joyfully in God's redeeming love and to share with others God's plan of salvation.

It is our prayer that the Holy Spirit will use this study to help you grow in your knowledge and appreciation of our God and His Word. *"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."* 2 Peter 3:18

STUDY STRUCTURE

LIVING WAY BIBLE STUDY SUGGESTS THIS FOUR-STEP METHOD

- 1. PERSONAL* – The student prays for guidance from the Holy Spirit and answers the Personal Application (P.A.) questions at home using only the Bible (no commentaries).
- 2. SMALL GROUPS* – The class meets for an opening and divides into small groups of 8–10 people. The small group leader guides the group through the P.A. questions, encouraging each to share their answers and discuss further as time allows.
- 3. THE MESSAGE* – The lecture or message is given by a pastor or layperson who has researched the material and presents the study, giving personal insight and augmenting, but not duplicating, the author's comments.
- 4. THE NARRATIVE* – The author's comments or narrative, along with the P.A. questions for the next lesson, are given out at the end of the class. At the next class meeting, before answering the P.A. questions, the small groups may choose to review the author's comments of the last lesson, and share what each has highlighted as meaningful or important.

With this four-step method the student has the opportunity to study the particular section of Scripture covered by the lesson from four different approaches. This emphasizes the Bible text and gives the student an understanding and ownership for each section studied.

Each lesson should be stapled together according to the number of the lesson in the right-hand corner of the page. The P.A. questions for the next week should be attached after the author's narrative for the current week, as they will be the home study for the next class session.

The first meeting of the class is an introduction to the study. Since the members of the small groups have no P.A. questions to discuss at the first meeting, they may use the time to get acquainted or to tell what they hope to receive by studying this course. At the first meeting, the lecturer presents background information about the course, using the Introduction lesson as a guide.

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“May the Word of God speak through Paul and inspire us to follow more closely the will of Him who has saved us from sin, death and the devil.”

• • • • •

Pastors find themselves wallowing in self-pity as frequently as anyone else. We whine about the problems of our congregations, the burdens of counseling those who have made a mess of their lives, the frustration of finding faithlessness among some of our members. But, whenever the tasks of ministry seem unjustly difficult, one need only read Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, his heart must have been breaking in two. The Corinthian Christians were plagued by so many difficult spiritual problems that Paul surely must have contemplated throwing his hands up in despair. The members were split into warring factions; some were suing one another in the secular courts; the celebration of the Lord’s Supper had disintegrated into an excuse for drunken carousing; one individual was having sexual relations with his stepmother. There were those who were disrupting worship services with their use of the Spirit’s extraordinary gifts. Some even disputed the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the members of the Corinthian church were confused about a number of practical issues such as the role of marriage among believers and unbelievers, and concerns about the eating of food which had been offered to idols.

Paul had to answer their many questions and admonish those within the church who were tearing it asunder. The result is a letter which has much to say to us today because the problems facing our congregations are similar to those faced by the Corinthians. Without this letter, our understanding of how Christians demonstrate their faith within the community of the church would be greatly impoverished.

Corinth was one of the major cities in Greece. The population of the city may have approached more than a half-million people; the majority

of them were slaves. The city was a crossroads for travelers and traders, incorporating a harbor on either side. Tradesmen came from all over the world, from Egypt and Phoenicia, Spain and Italy, bringing their goods and native religions and philosophies. Since Corinth was such a large commercial city, it tolerated open and unrestrained immorality. As a matter of fact, the term “to Corinthianize” became a euphemism for “to practice immorality.” The city contained at least twelve different temples, the most infamous being the temple of Aphrodite (the goddess of love). In this temple over one thousand prostitutes were available for those who wished to “worship” the goddess with acts of sexual immorality. Somewhere along the line, however, the Jews were able to establish a rather unimpressive synagogue within the city. The Corinthians prided themselves on their Greek culture, particularly with its emphasis on wisdom and philosophy.

So, you see, the Corinthian Christians were pressured by some rather overwhelming influences. They were exposed to pagan religions from around the world, they were being enticed to compromise their faith with the sensual joys of Aphrodite, and all the while they were being brainwashed to think they were part of the world’s intellectual and philosophical elite. The result was a group of immoral intellectual snobs who had a difficult time accepting any spiritual authority.

They sound like Americans!

The apostle Paul had established the Corinthian church during his second missionary journey, probably around AD 50. It was here that Paul met his friends Aquila and Priscilla, two Jews exiled from Rome under the Emperor Claudius who occasionally exiled both Jews and Christians because he believed they were the cause of constant tumult within the city. Paul started his ministry to Corinth in the Jewish synagogue, but was soon expelled for his radical teachings.

He remained in Corinth for a year and a half converting both Jew and Gentile to Christianity (see Acts 18:1–18).

Around AD 55, when Paul was on his third missionary journey and nearing the end of his three year ministry in Ephesus, he received word from various Christians “from the house of Chloe” that there were serious troubles affecting the Corinthian church. Now, interestingly, it seems that Paul had already written a letter to the Corinthians admonishing them about their moral laxness. He writes in 1 Corinthians 5:9–10: “I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people — not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.”

What happened to the first letter? No one knows. Will we find it someday? I doubt it. But think of the implications if some archaeologist uncovers it!

So, onward into the study of 1 Corinthians. May the Word of God speak through Paul and inspire us to follow more closely the will of Him who has saved us from sin, death and the devil. And remember Martin Luther’s summary of this particular letter:

“In short, things got so wild and disorderly that everyone wanted to be the expert and do the teaching and make what he pleased of the gospel, the sacrament, and faith. Meanwhile, they let the main thing drop — namely, that Christ is our salvation, righteousness, and redemption — as if they had long since outgrown it. This truth can never remain intact when people begin to imagine they are wise and know it all.”

PERSONAL APPLICATION*1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-17*

Heavenly Father, as we begin a study of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, send us Your Spirit, not only to guide us through life but also to unite us in faith. We pray that You would heal any division within our church by upholding Your Word as the sole authority for our faith and life. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

1. With what word does Paul describe his selection as an apostle of Christ Jesus? (1:1)

How was the prophet Isaiah selected? (Isaiah 6:8-9)

How about Jeremiah? (Jeremiah 1:4-5)

To what are we as disciples of Christ "called"? (1:2, 8; Romans 1:7)

What do the examples of Paul, Isaiah, and Jeremiah suggest about the source of our "call"? (Ephesians 1:4-6, 1:11-14; Romans 8:29-30)

2. What can we tell about the identity of "Sosthenes"? Who was he? (1:1; Acts 18:12-17)

How would that event have made Sosthenes a "brother" to Paul?

3. Paul states the Corinthians "do not lack any spiritual gift." How are Christians directed to use their gifts according to Romans 12:6-8?

4. Who let Paul know there were serious divisions within the Corinthian church? (1:11)

5. Why do you think some members of the Corinthian church would demonstrate spiritual allegiance to Paul? (Acts 18:1-11)

6. What kind of preacher was Apollos according to Acts 18:24 –19:1?

In contrast to Apollos, how did people describe Paul's preaching? (1 Corinthians 2:3; 2 Corinthians 10:7–10)

How does this explain why some people would claim Apollos as their spiritual leader rather than Paul?

-
7. Who was Cephas? (John 1:40–42)

So, who must have been responsible for converting the "Cephas faction" to Christ?

What religious background did those of the "Cephas faction" probably possess? (Galatians 2:7–8)

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8. Why might Paul also criticize the "Christ faction" in Corinth? (1:12; Matthew 7:21–23; Luke 13:24–27)

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9. List possible ways that serious divisions within your congregation could hurt the ministry of the church.

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10. In whose name alone are we to be baptized? (Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38)

Whose likeness do we put on when we are baptized? (Galatians 3:26–27)

-
11. Despite the divisions within the Corinthian church, of what is Paul confident? (1:8–9; Philippians 1:4–6; 1 Thessalonians 3:13)

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12. How are we made "blameless" before God? (Zechariah 3:3–4; John 1:29; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 9:26; 1 John 1:7)
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“He wanted the Corinthians to act as people united under Jesus Christ.”

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THE SALUTATION

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1–3

Every civilized letter begins by following a special formula which is customary for the times. When we write a business letter, we generally indicate who is sending the letter on the top right, followed by the date. Then we indicate on the left column who is being addressed. Then we begin: “Dear So and So...” When I receive a letter it’s always a “Dear John.” In Paul’s day, the formula for beginning a letter required the name of the sender, followed by the addressees, and finally a greeting. This customary introduction comprises the salutation of 1 Corinthians. And yet, Paul’s individuality is evident in every part.

Rather than just name himself “Paul,” the apostle refers to himself as “Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...” Clearly, the apostle had a certain sense of being specially chosen for a particular mission. In the Old Testament, the idea of someone being “especially called” by God is associated with prophets such as Isaiah (Isaiah 6:8–9) or Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4–5). As Paul begins his letter, he immediately asserts his authority as someone specially called to be an apostle, or messenger, of God, just as the prophets were “called” in the Old Testament. Paul’s claim was an important one, because there were many at Corinth doubting his word and authority.

Paul isn’t the only one sending greetings. “Our brother Sosthenes” is also included. Who is this Sosthenes? Perhaps it’s the Corinthian Jew whom we read about in Acts 18:17. After Paul had ministered in Corinth for some time, many of the Jews who felt threatened by Paul’s teachings conspired to drag Paul into court. But the Roman proconsul would have nothing to do with the case, declaring it to be an ecclesiastical rather than secular squabble. The Jews were maddened by the proconsul’s

apathy. They vented their wrath on the synagogue ruler, Sosthenes. Now, why would they be angry at the synagogue ruler unless he had already become a friend of Paul and a follower of Christ? So, the attack on the synagogue ruler in Acts probably tells us the identity of Sosthenes in 1 Corinthians.

To whom is the letter addressed? “The church at Corinth.” The Christians in Corinth have been called to holiness in God’s eyes by being washed in the blood of Jesus Christ, just as have all Christians.

And the greeting? “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The favor of God leads naturally to peace of mind. The enmity between God and man is over, and reconciliation has resulted.

THE THANKSGIVING PREAMBLE

1 CORINTHIANS 1:4-9

Very often Paul would follow his opening salutation with a section of thanksgiving and praise. We see that occur in Romans, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy, and Philemon. And, of course, in 1 Corinthians. In a way, the thanksgiving offered by Paul in 1 Corinthians is ironic. Sure, he praises them for their “speaking and knowledge,” but later Paul will dismiss human knowledge as prideful and destructive. He praises the Corinthians for possessing spiritual gifts in abundance, but later he will have to admonish them for using their spiritual gifts in a destructive manner.

Of course, it’s good psychology to begin a conversation on a positive note. Before Paul begins his admonitions, he wants them to know that no matter how egregious their guilt and shortcomings, the Lord has the power to keep them strong in the faith. And then Paul lets loose...

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Perhaps the biggest victory Satan can win is when a congregation self-destructs in a maelstrom of disagreement. When a congregation is in civil war, visitors are unwilling to join and learn the faith.

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DIVISIONS IN THE CHURCH

1 CORINTHIANS 1:10–17

How many Christians have become disillusioned with God’s Church because of divisions within the congregation? How many church workers have suffered as a result of “tribal warfare” between members? Nothing can more permanently destroy the effectiveness of a church than the emotional and spiritual destruction that arises in a congregational civil war.

Interestingly, these fratricidal struggles so common in our churches today are nothing new. They were already occurring two decades after Christ’s ascension. Listen to the urgency of Paul’s words: “I appeal to you brothers in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.” Why is this so important? Perhaps the biggest victory Satan can win is when a congregation self-destructs in a maelstrom of disagreement. When a congregation is in civil war, visitors are unwilling to join and learn the faith. Church workers are demoralized and often find other lines of work. Parishioners stop

coming to church. Offerings for missions dry up. The grace and mercy of Jesus Christ is displayed to the outside world as some sort of joke.

Sadly, Paul has heard that the Corinthian church is suffering from a number of quarreling cliques. Paul knows this because family members or slaves from one of his friends, named Chloe, have told him. Now, as Paul writes to the Corinthian church from his place in Ephesus, he exhorts them to grow united in Jesus Christ.

There were four main groups at war with one another. One group claimed as their leader Paul himself. Now, Paul’s name would have tremendous authority because Paul was the founder of the Corinthian church. His followers would argue that they were merely maintaining the teachings of their first pastor. Another group claimed with equal authority their leader was Apollos. Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria who, under Paul’s instruction, had become a great pastor in the early Christian church.

Each Christian generation seems to be blessed by a particularly effective gospel preacher. Perhaps our generation will remember Billy Graham as that singular man who spoke with eloquence and authority. Apollos may have been the “Billy Graham” of the early church. We know that he was a “learned man with a thorough knowledge of Scripture” (Acts 18:24). He was probably Paul’s successor at Corinth (1 Corinthians 3:6; Acts 19:1). He was a “bold” and “fervent” speaker (Acts 18:25–26), and he was an excellent debater (Acts 18:28). Now, if we compare Apollos with the description some were using in Corinth about Paul, we can see how individuals would be tempted to place Apollos over Paul.

In 2 Corinthians 10:10, Paul records what some in Corinth were saying about him: “His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.” Paul was truly an apostle of the Lord, but he wasn’t particularly “charismatic.” Apollos, on the other hand, could hold his audience in the palm of his hand. And since Apollos was Paul’s successor at Corinth, it’s no wonder the newer members would be more loyal to Apollos.

There were still other contending groups. Some claimed neither Paul nor Apollos as their spiritual leader. They claimed Cephas, that is, Peter. Since Peter’s ministry occurred primarily among the Jews in Palestine, we can imagine that this group of his followers was comprised of Jews coming from the east and settling in Corinth. Their claim of authority would be powerful; too, considering Peter was one of the original twelve disciples

who actually witnessed Christ’s death and resurrection. That, they would claim, is more than could be said of Paul and Apollos.

And then there was the “Christ party.” So, what’s wrong about claiming to follow Christ rather than Paul, Peter, or Apollos? Since Paul also criticizes this faction, we can imagine their claim was both false and arrogant. We can imagine them espousing false doctrine while claiming their beliefs to be the only genuine interpretation of Christ’s life and ministry. A contemporary example might be found in some nondenominational churches which claim to preach the “true” word of Christ unimpeded by any particular denominational interpretation. Of course, if a congregation does not follow a denominational interpretation of Christ’s life and ministry, it will necessarily be following an individual’s interpretation. And that can result in some truly bizarre theology.

The apostle Paul is frustrated with all four groups, and calls on them to unite. As a matter of fact, Paul is so ashamed by the quarreling among the various factions that he expresses his relief at having baptized only a few of the Corinthian Christians. Otherwise, many of the Corinthians would be claiming their baptismal pastor as their sole spiritual leader. The only individuals baptized by Paul were Crispus (probably the ruler of the synagogue whose conversion is reported in Acts 18:8), Gaius (also known as Titius Justus, whose hospitality Paul enjoyed while in Corinth — see Acts 18:7) and Stephanas (Paul’s first convert in Achaia — see 1 Corinthians 16:15).

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*Division is the devil's work, and when we
break down into groups and cliques, we
hinder the work of God's kingdom.*

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When Paul reminds his readers he was not chosen by God to baptize, but to preach, he is not minimizing the importance of baptism. He is simply reminding them that his primary responsibility as an apostle is to preach. The baptizing would be left to those who followed him.

The thrust of Paul's first exhortation, then, was to remove the barriers between the various "tribes" within the church. He wanted the Corinthians to act as people united under Jesus Christ. It's an exhortation that every congregation must remember. Division is the devil's work, and when we break down into groups and cliques, we hinder the work of God's kingdom. Is your church divided today? Then it's time to swallow some pride, return to the Lord, and join hands with one another in renewed service to the Lord.

PERSONAL APPLICATION*1 CORINTHIANS 1:18–2:16*

Dear Lord Jesus, as I study Your Word given to me through Paul, I marvel at how Your divine wisdom surpasses all human wisdom. I pray that as one of Your ordinary children — without extraordinary abilities or magnetic personality — You would use me to spread the Good News of salvation to my family and friends. I pray in Your name. Amen.

1. Who is the smartest person you've ever known?

In what way did he or she demonstrate great intellect?

In what way did such “intellect” get in the way of practical living?

2. What does the Lord have a tendency to do towards the world’s “wisest”? (Job 5:13; Isaiah 29:14, 44:24–25; Jeremiah 8:9)

3. How does the message of the Gospel appear to unbelievers? (Luke 10:21; 1 Corinthians 1:18, 23, 2:14)

4. Where is true wisdom found? (Deuteronomy 4:5–8; Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10, 119:97–98, 130; 1 Corinthians 1:30)

Where does this divine wisdom come from? (Daniel 2:20–21; Psalm 119:34; Colossians 1:9; 2 Timothy 3:15; James 1:5)

What will happen to those who are divinely wise? (Daniel 12:3; Matthew 13:43; John 8:32)

5. Why was it difficult for the Jews to believe in Jesus? (Matthew 12:22–24, 12:38–39, 16:1; 1 Corinthians 1:22–23)

Why was it so difficult for the Gentiles? (Acts 17:16–21; 1 Corinthians 1:22–23; Colossians 2:8)

Why do you think it is so difficult for people today to believe in Jesus? (1 Corinthians 2:14)

6. Describe the social status of many of the Corinthian Christians. (1 Corinthians 1:26)

How do they resemble the members of your congregation?

7. In the following passages, how does God choose “foolish” people for His exalted work?
Exodus 3:1–11

Judges 6:11–16

Isaiah 6:1–8

Jeremiah 1:4–8

Matthew 4:18–22

Luke 1:26–33

Acts 9:1–6

8. If God is the One who gives us true wisdom which leads to salvation, then where do our accomplishments fit in? (Romans 2:23–24; 1 Corinthians 1:31; Ephesians 2:8–10; 1 Timothy 1:8–9)

9. When and how was God’s “secret wisdom” finally revealed in its entirety? (Romans 16:25–27; Ephesians 1:9–10, 3:2–9; Colossians 1:25–27, 2:2)

10. Describe a moment when you felt you could almost read another person’s mind.

What was he or she thinking and how did you know?

How can we read God’s thoughts? (John 15:15; 1 Corinthians 2:11–12)



FIRST CORINTHIANS

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-2:16

1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-5	14
1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-16	14
PERSONAL APPLICATION - 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-23	16



“But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

1 CORINTHIANS 1:23-24



1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31

THE FOOLISHNESS OF THE GOSPEL

There is nothing more foolish to some than the belief that the God of our universe became a human being, died on the cross for something called “sin,” then rose again to give mortals immortality. Even today there are those who call themselves “Christian” and yet deny the possibility of God becoming man and dying for sin. They view the biblical account of Jesus’ ministry as a morally uplifting fable. But, like everything else in our world, this is nothing particularly new. In Paul’s day, there were both Jew and Gentile who viewed the Gospel account as utterly absurd.

In this section of 1 Corinthians, Paul is reminding his readers of our Lord’s modus operandi (His method of operation). Time after time, God takes what is common and lowly and exalts it to blessedness. He chose simple men to be His prophets and apostles. He chose a common young woman to give Jesus birth. He selected an insignificant town named Bethlehem to be the place of His Son’s birth, and He appointed lowly shepherds to be the first recipients of the Gospel. He prefers to use unsophisticated means, like the water of baptism, the bread and wine of Holy Communion, and the simple words of Scripture to create the miracle of “faith” in people’s hearts. How basic and elementary! Why should the Lord select the undistinguished rather than the rich and famous? Why wasn’t the Lord born in Caesar’s palace? Why wasn’t He of noble parentage? In every way, the Lord chooses what the world views as relatively worthless in order to embarrass those of high repute. That is why we call Him a God of grace.



Paul reminds us that the Lord is not impressed by “wise” men or scholars. Their knowledge and sophistication is laughable when weighed against our Lord’s infinite wisdom and power. The man of faith, therefore, need not be a man of intellect or talent. As a matter of fact, reason can interfere with the gift of faith when it is used to discount the authenticity of God’s transcendent mystery and power. A “reasonable” man asks, “Why would a Creator become a simple man?” “How can a man rise from the dead?” “How can anyone believe in an afterlife since all empirical evidence points to the finality of death?”

“But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23–24). When the message of the Gospel reached their ears, most Jews scoffed. They felt the promised “Messiah” would be a great political and military leader, not a transient preacher. They believed the Christ would be a man of vision and grandeur. How could they seriously consider this common man, the son of a carpenter, from some little town called Nazareth, to be the Savior? After all, He didn’t follow their man-made laws when He healed on the Sabbath. He didn’t live up to their temporal expectations of how the Messiah should appear and what He should do. And so, for the Jews, Jesus’ message became a “stumbling block.”

For the Greeks, on the other hand, who worshipped man’s “wisdom” in literature, science, and architecture, the idea that God became man and died for the “sins” of the world was complete idiocy. To the Greeks who reveled in philosophical conversations about the mysteries of the universe, the Christian message

was merely one more note in the riotous music of their speculations. So, for the Greeks, the message of the Gospel was mere “foolishness.”

Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that their backgrounds are not very impressive by human standards. “Think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.” The Corinthian Christians were common ordinary people. The Lord isn’t only calling movie stars and heads of state. He is seeking all people — people like you and me. Thanks be to God!

And the remarkable thing is that our Lord chooses the ordinary as an example to the world’s elite. He tells us that those very individuals who pride themselves on being the best and brightest are in fact the most deluded. “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things [beings] of the world to shame the strong” (v. 27). Remember, it is His *modus operandi* to exalt what the world scorns.

In our day, so called “theologians” and “scholars” are paraded by Time, Newsweek, and U. S. News debating Jesus’ authenticity. They are on a crusade to discover the true identity of the mythical figure named “Jesus.” There are scholars who gather to vote on which of Jesus’ words are genuine and which were added by the early church. In every way, the wise of our world seek to discount the biblical Jesus. But as Psalm 2:4–5 says, “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath...”

And, Paul says, there is one reason for the Lord’s *modus operandi*. He chooses the lowly so that no one may boast in his or her faith and salvation.

“Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord’” (v. 31). We have no reason to feel our election to God’s kingdom is because of our intrinsic worth. We have been given saving faith simply by God’s mercy and grace. And every time we see the Lord using something lowly, like water or bread and wine, or the words of forgiveness, we are reminded of that mysterious grace.

1 CORINTHIANS 2:1–5

In Paul’s view, perhaps the best example of God’s mysterious grace is His selection of Paul to be an apostle. We are touched by Paul’s humility when he reminds the Corinthians of his appearance among them. He was not eloquent or trained in human wisdom. He came to the Corinthians feeling weak and fearful, so frightened he was actually trembling (much like a young pastor as he preaches his first sermon). He wasn’t particularly articulate. He simply preached the words of Christ and made Jesus the only topic of his preaching and teaching.

In this day when congregations are tempted to call a pastor on the basis of his “dynamic personality” or “eloquent sermons,” perhaps Paul’s description of his limited talents should inspire us to seek those who are committed to the preaching of God’s Word rather than those whose personalities are most magnetic. The fact is people are converted to Christ not because of persuasive words, but because of the work of the Holy Spirit working through the means of God’s Word. When the Word is accurate, conversion is possible. When it’s merely man’s attractive words, the power of the Holy Spirit may be confined.

1 CORINTHIANS 2:6–16

After having denounced human wisdom, Paul reminds the Corinthians that there exists

a divine wisdom which is true and reliable. This divine wisdom can be known by the mature Christian, to one who has grown in an understanding of God’s Word and blossomed in the strength of faith. Spiritual wisdom is not like the common wisdom held by the world, nor the erudite wisdom professed by the world’s elite. It encompasses an understanding of God’s mysterious will for His people.

Now an interesting thing about God’s wisdom is that it remained hidden for many years. Although God’s plan of salvation existed from the dawn of time, He did not fully reveal that plan until the coming of the Lord Jesus. To some extent, the promise of a Messiah was evident to Adam and Eve at the “fall” when God promised the serpent that there would be enmity between Eve’s descendant and the devil, and that her descendant would crush the head of the serpent. But the details of God’s plan remained hidden, so much so that when Eve gave birth to her son, Cain, she may have believed he was the Messiah. When Eve said, “With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man,” the Hebrew is unclear enough that it might be translated, as Luther believed, “I have the man, the Lord!” While Eve was unable to comprehend fully God’s plan of salvation, nevertheless, she and Adam trusted in God’s promise of redemption.

Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets of God received visions, dreams and prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, but perhaps they never clearly understood the details of God’s salutary plans. Daniel and Ezekiel had foreknowledge of God’s plan to resurrect His people. Isaiah could foresee the Messiah as a Suffering Servant. Zechariah predicted the Christ would ride victoriously before God’s people on a donkey, and Micah even predicted where God’s Promised One would be born. But not one of them could envision

the whole plan of redemption in its entirety.

It remained largely God's secret. That is why the prophet Isaiah could write the words quoted by Paul: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

Paul asserted that the world's nobility were unable to recognize this secret plan of redemption. If the rulers at Jerusalem had known Jesus was the true Messiah, they never would have allowed Him to die on the cross. But they lived in spiritual blindness and proceeded with the execution despite the presence of God's Son among them. Even the devil was unaware of God's mysterious plan. Had he known that the crucifixion was necessary to redeem mankind of their sins, he never would have instigated Judas' betrayal nor induced murderous urges in the hearts of Herod, Caiaphas, and the people of Jerusalem. God's plan remained a mystery until Easter morning when the world discovered that the Lord had delivered His faithful through the resurrection of His Son.

Even today people are unaware of God's plan of salvation because our belief and trust in The Plan is solely the result of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts. It is the Spirit of God, Paul says, who reveals God's redemption to us.

To demonstrate the method of the Spirit's action, Paul reminds us that no one can know our thoughts except our own spirit. A man can smile at us while thinking, "What a ridiculous fool," and we have no inkling of his true attitude towards us. Even as the individual is the only one with a full understanding of his own thoughts and feelings, so only the Spirit of God understands and knows God's thoughts and plans. Thus, when the Spirit of

God dwells in us, it is as if the very thoughts and plans of God have been given us. When we preach God's Word, Paul says it isn't our own thoughts and ideas, but the thoughts and feelings of our God.

As a result, only those possessing the Spirit can understand God's plan of salvation. No matter how wise we are, no matter how intelligent, no matter how creative or charming, we cannot understand and believe God's mysterious plan of salvation unless the Spirit gives us the power to do so. For Christians, the plan of salvation is simple and beautiful. God sent His perfect Son to live the perfect life we were intended to live. Then He died the death we deserved for our sins. As a result of Jesus' sacrifice, we receive His perfection in God's eyes while He suffered the death and damnation we deserved. For us, it was a glorious substitution.

But to the minds of those who have driven out the Lord's Spirit, this beautiful and simple Gospel message appears completely absurd. Only the person with the Spirit can accept God's thoughts and plans. Those who have refused to receive the Spirit cannot fathom the Lord's presence and intent for His people. Knowing this can be of some comfort for our evangelism. The Lord calls us to spread His Gospel message, but it is not our responsibility to make others believe it. Only those with the Spirit of the Lord will hear, receive, and understand God's plan.

It has been the dream of people down through the annals of science fiction to be able to read the thoughts of others. Paul says that through the Spirit, we can indeed read the thoughts of God. We are given those thoughts in God's Word. In this sense, it is no exaggeration for Paul to conclude, "But we have the mind of Christ."