

## Introduction

I can always tell when my wife or perhaps one of my daughters has purchased something on Amazon that is of a feminine nature, because suddenly I will see ads for, say, women’s underwear, *everywhere* online. I’m never in the market for some new skirt or for skin care products or for Capri leggings, yet I see ads for these now, because one of these lovely ladies has purchased such things recently on our shared Amazon account.

Some of the ads I see online, however, feel very targeted and specific—and maybe a bit personal. Recently I’ve been seeing ads for a training course to be a better preacher. Part of me wonders who signed me up! I’ve been a bit intrigued by this as I recognize I have a lot of room to grow in my preaching. Then I noticed one of these ads referred to the pulpit—that is, the elevated platform and lectern used in preaching—as a stage. I know many refer to the podium as a stage. (A podium is what you stand *on*, not what you stand *behind*.) It’s an interesting choice of words for a stage is where one *performs* while a pulpit is where one *proclaims*.

A stage is also a raised platform but the ads for this preaching course also mention “preaching and teaching in a way that actually moves people”, as if the goal of preaching were an emotional response. This seems to fit with the language of a stage, hinting at the notion of a performance. I’ve certainly been emotionally moved by preaching, but not because of some technique employed by the “communicator” who was seeking to move me emotionally.

In this final sermon on discipleship we will take a look at Paul’s approach to preaching. Rather than an attempt at eloquence and powerful rhetoric, Paul’s preaching was in the power of the Spirit and he moves from this reality to the lives of the Corinthians, for what characterized his *preaching* should also characterize their *lives*. We’re in 1 Corinthians 2.

<sup>1</sup> Cor 2:1 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. <sup>2</sup> For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. <sup>3</sup> And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, <sup>4</sup> and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

<sup>6</sup> Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. <sup>7</sup> But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. <sup>8</sup> None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. <sup>9</sup> But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—<sup>10</sup> these things God has revealed to us

through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.<sup>11</sup> For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.<sup>12</sup> Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.<sup>13</sup> And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

<sup>14</sup> The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.<sup>15</sup> The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.<sup>16</sup> "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

1 Corinthians 2:1–16

## The Power of God

In chapter 1 Paul reminds the Corinthians that not many of them had been powerful in the world's eyes. Not many of them were of noble birth. For the most part they were just ordinary folk who responded to the gospel of Jesus in faith. It is amazing how quickly we can forget this! Rather than being great, he says God chose what is weak in the world and what is low and despised in the world, which is to say, God chose the Corinthians. Can you imagine saying that to someone today? "God loves you...because God loves what is weak and low and despised!"

He's not trying to embarrass them or even to put them down. He starts chapter 2 by including himself in this group of those with little to offer in terms of what the world values. He says that when he came to them he didn't arrive in Corinth proclaiming "the testimony of God" with lofty speech or wisdom. The word "testimony" there is the word for mystery. The mystery of God is the gospel of Jesus, proclaimed to every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.

He says he didn't show up in Corinth with lofty speech or wisdom. He doesn't mean he lacked wisdom and was therefore foolish. Wisdom in this context refers to oratorical skill, to eloquence, to sophistry. Corinth was a culture steeped in Greco-Roman rhetoric where people would train and study to become public speakers who could move a crowd and sway them with their philosophical sophistication. In short, Paul was not trying to impress the Corinthians, to leave them with a sense of his own greatness.

Dio Chrysostom was born in the year 40—just ten years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. He was a famous public speaker: Chrysostom means "golden-mouth"—it wasn't his real last name. He bragged about visiting cities such as Rome and the great receptions he had when he visited them.

I was escorted with much enthusiasm and acclaim, and the recipients of my visit were so eager to hear me speak that they begged me to address them, crowding around my doors from early dawn. All this occurred without my having incurred any expense or having made any contribution, resulting in universal admiration for me.

He's saying he was so popular as a public speaker he didn't have to pay anything for lodging or food and didn't have to give gifts of any kind—which was expected of the rich and famous—because people loved to hear him speak. They *begged* to be moved by one of his speeches. In that day people reacted to seeing a great speaker the way people today react to seeing a sports celebrity. In the first century everyone went around singing, “Sometimes I dream that he is me; You’ve got to see that’s how I dream to be; I dream I move, I dream I groove like *Dio Chrysostom*...If I could be like *Dio Chrysostom*.”

Paul says he didn't go to Corinth in this way. Instead of lofty speech and this sort of “wisdom”, he arrived in Corinth and had already decided he would know nothing among them except this: Jesus Christ and him crucified.

That's it. That's Paul's claim to fame among them. He would preach about a man who had been crucified by Rome. Paul does not mean the only topic of his preaching and teaching was the actual crucifixion. His point is that he did not seek to wow the crowds with soaring rhetoric. As they themselves knew, he preached Christ crucified, which was a stumbling block to Greeks and Romans. He didn't try to dress it up with high falootin' language; how could he? Every single one of them had either directly witnessed a crucifixion or had seen crucified men hanging on crosses. There's no way to dress that up. Paul didn't try but instead made it central to his public message.

I know a man who planted a church many years ago and the church exploded in size, reaching a peak above 10,000 people every Sunday. He is an amazingly gifted communicator. If I said his name most of you would recognize it, yet it's unlikely you'd remember his message. When he left that church, its size plummeted nearly 90%, for much of that growth rested on human wisdom.

Contrast that to the greatest preacher I've ever heard. Charlie Dates serves a church in Chicago. Several years ago he preached a sermon at the seminary and when he finished I turned to my wife and said, “I have never preached before.” The difference between these two profoundly gifted preachers is the former relied on himself and his speaking gift while Charlie Dates preaches in the power of the Spirit. The problem isn't in the giftedness of either, but that in which the one was trusting.

Paul says in verse 3 he was with them in weakness and in fear and with much trembling. Scholars often wonder what he means, exactly. In what sense was he weak? His message! He preached Jesus Christ and him crucified! If Dio Chrysostom had arrived in Corinth he most certainly would not have come talking about a man who had been crucified. Rather than preach with “plausible words of wisdom” Paul says he preached “in demonstration of the Spirit and of power”. This is so their faith would not be rooted in a man's eloquence but in the Spirit's power through the message of Christ's death and resurrection. He said something similar to the Thessalonians.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Thess 1:4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, <sup>5</sup> because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. ~~You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.~~

1 Thessalonians 1:4-5

The power he means was not in the performance of some miracle but a far greater demonstration of the Spirit's power. He goes on to describe this power on display:

1 Thess 1:9 For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

1 Thessalonians 1:9

People throughout the region where Thessalonica was located had seen the demonstration of the Spirit's power, and it wasn't in a healing or raising someone from the dead. The Thessalonians had turned away from idols to serve the living and true God. This was the demonstration of the Spirit's power. This is why Paul refused to engage in human wisdom—eloquence and powerful rhetoric and sophistry. Had he done so and some still responded to the gospel, the question would remain: were they convinced by the gospel, or were they swayed by the performance of the apostle? Paul wanted there to be no doubt as to it being the power of God. Anthony Thiselton put it this way:

His aim here is to expose the true basis and nature of Christian proclamation in contrast to the “self-presentation” of the visiting sophist. Christian proclamation does not allow for high-sounding rhetoric or a display of cleverness which could impede the gospel by putting first what pleases the audience and the personal “style” of the speaker. The apostle does not arrive with displays of pomp and applause.

Anthony C. Thiselton, NIGTC

It wasn't sophisticated speech that converted the Corinthians. It wasn't miraculous signs and wonders. It wasn't that he spoke in tongues or some other miraculous display. It was the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified, died, and resurrected. The proof of Paul's apostolic ministry was in the transformation of the Corinthians themselves.

## God's Wisdom

While Paul refused to offer man's wisdom, he says in verse 6 that he does, in fact, impart wisdom, though it is God's wisdom. He further clarifies: this wisdom he imparts is also not the wisdom of the rulers of this age, but is “a secret and hidden wisdom of God”, one that “God decreed before the ages”. What is this wisdom? This is the mystery of Christ he wrote about in Ephesians. He says in chapter 1 of this letter Christ is “the power of God and the wisdom of God”.

From the beginning God has intended to create for himself a people who are in his image, that is, a people who represent him fully and accurately. To do this requires the Holy Spirit's power in transforming us. This is the “secret and hidden wisdom of God”. His plan has always been our transformation through the gospel. If the rulers of the age had understood, he says in verse 8 they wouldn't have crucified Jesus.

These rulers are both human rulers and spiritual beings opposed to God. These spiritual forces of evil thought they were stopping God's plan by killing Jesus, yet the death of Jesus

was God's means for saving his people. These rulers thought they were stopping God but they were being *played*. As Peter said on the day of Pentecost, Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" yet was "crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men". God didn't do this merely to show his own cleverness, however.

Paul alludes to Isaiah 64 which indicates the incredible grace God promises to his people, a blessing simply not available to impressive public speakers who are able to wow crowds. The culture loved wisdom and yet Paul indicates it's not actually available outside of Christ. True wisdom and true understanding are only available through the Spirit of God.

He explains why in verses 10 and 11. Paul and the other apostles understood the gospel message because the Spirit of God revealed it. The reason those who only have the wisdom of the world do not understand is because it is only the Spirit who can truly reveal Christ, for the only one who can know a person's thoughts is that person, and the Spirit of God is God so God's thoughts are known to the Spirit.

Notice verse 11. He says they—he and the other apostles—impart "this" not by human wisdom but by the Spirit. What is "this"? It's the secret and hidden wisdom of God, God's eternal purpose realized in Christ. He means the gospel of the Lord Jesus, Christ and him crucified. Notice closely: he imparts this knowledge of God by the Spirit, *interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual*.

That's a word that's often tossed around. I'm sure you've heard someone say, "I'm not religious; I'm *spiritual*". Do you follow Jesus? No? Then you are most definitely not *spiritual*! To be *spiritual* is to be of or by the Spirit of God! That would be like saying you're musical but you don't read music and you don't play an instrument and you can't carry a tune and, in fact, you don't even listen to music. In what sense, then, are you *musical*? What they really mean is they are *mystical*. They like the idea of something transcendent but reject God as he has revealed himself in Christ by the Spirit.

That's human wisdom in action. You can't claim knowledge of the divine apart from the one who reveals that knowledge. These are spiritual truths given to people who are truly spiritual on account of having the Spirit of God.

This is why he says the natural person does not accept the things of God. If someone says, "I'm not religious; I'm spiritual" what they mean is, "I'm not religious; I'm *natural*". Earthly. *Worldly*. The things of the Spirit of God are foolish to such a person because these things are spiritually discerned—discerned of or by the Spirit of God!

One commentary noted that the person without the Spirit commenting on the things of God is like a colorblind person commenting on a rainbow after the rain. Apart from the Spirit of God people are blind to the things of God. They cannot know them and they cannot understand them. The opposite is also true. He says the spiritual person—the one who has the Spirit of God—judges all things. That's the same word. The natural person cannot understand the things of God because they're spiritually *discerned* whereas the spiritual person *discerns* all things. The spiritual person comprehends the things of God.

The natural person belongs entirely to the physical world. Such a person is spiritually dead, unable to respond to spiritual truth. His point is the Corinthians have the Spirit of God and therefore have the capacity to comprehend the things of the Spirit of God. That's why he ends the chapter with the declaration, "But we have the mind of Christ". They have all the ingredients necessary to think and act and love and do as Christ would. The question is whether they make use of it.

## Infants

Paul moves immediately from declaring they have the mind of Christ on account of being spiritual people—people of the Spirit of God—to saying this:

<sup>1</sup> Cor 3:1 But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, <sup>3</sup> for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?

1 Corinthians 3:1–3

They have the mind of Christ, he says, so why are they acting like infants? They're being childish! The context here is some followed Paul and others followed Apollos and still others followed Peter—as if these men weren't on the same team. Apollos was widely regarded for his preaching ability and Paul, well, here's what his opponents in Corinth said about Paul:

<sup>2</sup> Cor 10:10 For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account."

2 Corinthians 10:10

They were competing for power and influence, for recognition. When he says there was jealousy and strife among them, this is what he's getting at. Though they were not from the upper echelons of Corinthian society, they jockeyed back and forth for position, for status. Though they had the mind of Christ—they had the Spirit!—they acted like self-centered children, demanding what others had been given and for reputation and for influence.

Contrast this to Paul: Paul wasn't impressive. He couldn't command a crowd. He didn't move them to tears and then laughter and then remorse and then elation, all in a few sentences. His letters were far more eloquent than his sermons, but Paul wasn't trying to impress anyone. He was trying to be faithful, so that the Spirit of God would receive all the credit and the glory for their response to the gospel of Jesus.

Though they have the Spirit and are therefore *spiritual people*, he couldn't really speak to them as such, for they were acting in a way that was *merely* human. That is, they were earthly. They were acting like those who were *natural*, not like those who were *spiritual*.

We've seen throughout this series that spiritual maturity is seen in this: being like Christ. As we grow in maturity we begin to think and act like Christ thinks and acts. The old "WWJD" bracelet thing years ago was actually quite brilliant. If Christians would truly ask, "What would Jesus do in this situation?" and then go do that thing, they would be more like Christ. If we would ask, "What would Jesus *think* about this situation?" and then adjust our thinking to match, we would be more like Jesus. To become spiritually mature requires that we act and think like Jesus.

The Corinthians were neither acting like Christ nor thinking like Christ. The first problem Paul addresses was division in the church. They were creating factions, small groups of individuals who pitted themselves against the rest. To say, "Apollos is my guy; you can keep Paul" was to think and act in a manner contrary to Jesus. Paul tells them in chapter 3 when

they do this, “are you not being merely human”? They’re being earthly. Worldly. *Natural*, not *spiritual*.

In chapter 5 when he rebukes them for tolerating and even celebrating sexual immorality in the church, they were not thinking like Christ, for the Lord Jesus is utterly without sin and desires his people be holy. In chapter 6 they were not thinking like Christ. Paul rebukes them for their lawsuits against one another. He wrote this:

<sup>1</sup> Cor 6:7 To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you.  
Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?  
1 Corinthians 6:7

Jesus suffered wrong. He was falsely accused and falsely convicted and falsely executed for crimes he did not commit. He endured this for the sake of his church. The fact that the Corinthians won’t suffer wrong demonstrates they are not thinking like those who have the mind of Christ. Paul says the very existence of lawsuits between them shows this.

In chapter 8 he addresses the issue of meat offered to idols. In the ancient world butcher shops were often connected to temples. Zeus, for example, was given blood. Some gods were given the entrails. In such sacrifices, the meat of the animals killed was never given to the gods; only the parts that were otherwise useless to humans were given to the gods. It was all very convenient for the worshipers that the Greek and Roman gods didn’t want the ribeyes and the filets and the roasts and such. The gods seemed to really enjoy the spleen and the pancreas and the guts of an animal and left the otherwise unwanted delicious parts of the bull to the meat market. This was the meat that was sold to the public.

Paul was very clear: the earth belongs to the Lord, and the fullness thereof. Since an idol was nothing, such meat was offered to nothing. Eat it! However, he also said if a brother or sister in Christ—one for whom Christ died—is offended by such consumption, then for the sake of a brother or sister in Christ, don’t eat it! What determines the exercise of your freedom isn’t that your individual rights are so important, but how it affects others. This is the mind of Christ!

Jesus, though, or it could be rendered, *because* he was in the form of God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. That is, Jesus, the human being with the *most* rights on account of being God, did not insist on his own rights. Instead, he humbled himself and took on the form of a servant and became obedient to death, and not just any death: death on a cross, a death reserved for the worst offenders.

All of the problems in Corinth—and Paul wrote more than the two letters included in the New Testament to address these issues—all of these problems stem from their childish self-interest. This was most evident in their tribalism, their “I’m Team Paul” or their “I’m Team Apollos” or their “I’m Team Peter” nonsense. Paul calls them out for this, telling them they’re being infants when they should be spiritual grownups.

## The Mind of Christ

The opposite of spiritual infancy is spiritual maturity, and spiritual maturity is seen in having the mind of Christ. The Corinthians loved human wisdom found in clever arguments and powerful rhetoric. They were in many ways a *personality-driven* culture. Greco-Roman

culture constantly pursued honor and status. Yes, you might inherit wealth, but you had to constantly display it for applause. “Oh, look! He’s paying for a new statue to make our city center more beautiful! Yay, him!” They sought recognition in their speaking ability. Everyone needed recognition. “Look at me! What a virtuous citizen I am!”

Social capital would be gained by aligning with the right faction. You could gain prestige by being associated with a powerful rhetorician or wealthy donor. Any perceived slights against your faction could trigger an intense response because you were threatening someone’s deeply rooted identity. *How dare you post against my political party...*

Corinth was also a commercial hub, and everyone was looking for a patron—someone with whom they could associate to gain influence. This is the real root of “I’m of Paul” and “I’m of Apollos”. They were essentially recreating the world’s patronage system in the church. Paul’s pushback in both First and Second Corinthians is that their allegiance is not to Paul or Apollos or Peter or any other apostle or church leader. Their allegiance is to the Lord Jesus Christ. *Period.*

If their allegiance is to Jesus, they don’t need the world’s wisdom. If their allegiance is to Jesus, they don’t need to fight and position for influence. If their allegiance is to Jesus, they don’t need to seek an identity anywhere else, for the Lord Jesus grants them his identity. Jesus is their Patron and he therefore is the one who gives them meaning and purpose and significance in this world! Salvation is union with Christ!

What does this have to do with discipleship? Other than everything, nothing. It means that since we have the Spirit, we have everything necessary for life and godliness, for maturation and sanctification. Peter put it this way:

2 Pet 1:3 His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, <sup>4</sup> by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

2 Peter 1:3–4

This means we have all the ingredients necessary to become like Jesus, or as Peter puts it, to “become partakers of the divine nature”. We become what God is—not in *essence*, but in *character*. We enter into God’s life and are so thoroughly transformed by his power that we become like him. This is the outcome of our salvation, from the moment we are justified by faith and throughout this lifetime of sanctification, of becoming more like Christ. The aim of discipleship is truly to become more like Jesus.

What is so very interesting is why Paul brings up his own preaching. Sure, there were those in Corinth who didn’t like him because he lacked what they thought he should have. He wasn’t a so-called “super-apostle” like those we read about in 2 Corinthians. Not only did he not wow the crowds, he didn’t even try to wow them! On some level he did seek to defend his role as an apostle, but that was clearly secondary. Paul wanted them to become like Christ.

Paul offers his own apostolic ministry as a paradigm for how they ought to live. The very things that characterized his preaching—primarily his focus on Jesus Christ and him crucified rather than on presenting himself in a certain way—ought to be the very things



that characterize their lives. They should, in effect, live the same way he preached: in the power of the Spirit.

Paul assures them—and us—they have all the necessary ingredients to become more like Jesus! It isn't found in following a list of rules like the rich young ruler but in following the Spirit who prompts our obedience through a changed heart and its new desires.

We have all the ingredients necessary to become more like Jesus, not by trying to grow a platform or an online persona with sound bites and pithy spiritual talking points, but by studying the written word of God that reveals Jesus to us, and by pointing one another to the truths it contains.

We have all the ingredients necessary to become more like Jesus, not by merely trying to avoid sin, but by confessing our sin to our brothers and sisters when we find ourselves struggling. We walk with each other, side by side, not one above the other so as to look down on one another in judgment. We walk together, carrying one another's burdens, praying for one another as we face temptation.

We have all the ingredients to become more like Jesus, not by striving to make it alone, but by living in intentional Christian community, even when it's messy. We refuse to cancel a brother or sister when he or she says or even does something stupid. We bear with one another as brothers and sisters.

We have all the ingredients necessary to become more like Jesus, not by trying harder and digging deeper, but by living faithfully, by living obediently, by wisely walking in a world hostile to the gospel. We don't live transactional lives, assuming if we give something to God he is somehow in our debt. We simply live in response to who he is.

We have all the ingredients necessary to become more like Jesus, not by insisting on our own rights and our own preferences, but by imitating Jesus who refused to insist on his rights and died in our place as a result.

We have all the ingredients necessary to become more like Jesus, not by focusing on our own personal walk with him, but by sharing our spiritual gifts with one another, and we don't do this for what we can gain, whether recognition or accolades or praise, but for what has already been given to us in the death and resurrection of Christ. This comes when we recognize the body of Christ is healthy and productive when each and every part is working properly and we tend to those that are not.

We have all the ingredients necessary to become more like Jesus, for we have the mind of Christ. In the words of the true golden-mouthed preacher,

We know the things which are in the mind of Christ, which he has willed and revealed to us. This does not mean that we know everything which Christ knows but rather that everything which we know comes from him and is spiritual.

John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians, 7.12

When everything we know comes from him and is spiritual, then we will be like Jesus. Let's follow in Paul's footsteps and decide to know nothing in this world except Jesus Christ and him crucified. Church, *this* is God's plan for discipleship.