

1 Corinthians 1: 18- 2:5
Session 2 – Study Notes
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1. Following his initial appeal for unity in the church, Paul now moves on a different argumentative tack. He launches into an extended meditation on the meaning of the cross,
2. The fundamental theme of this section of the letter is the opposition between human wisdom (Sophia) and the “word of the cross.”
3. The twin pillars of Paul’s exposition are the Old Testament quotations in 1:19 and 1:31. Both are taken from passages depicting God as one who acts to judge and save his people in ways that defy human expectations.
4. In this part of the letter, Paul makes no explicit reference to the problems at Corinth: The theme of divisions in the church does not reappear until 3:1-4.
5. As we read through this section, we see Paul’s diagnosis of the root causes of the Corinthian conflict.
 - They are caught up in rivalries because they glory in the superficially impressive human wisdom of the age.
 - They are boasting about their possession of wisdom and rhetorical eloquence –
 - Or at least they are infatuated with leaders who manifest these skills.
6. God has chosen to save the world through the cross, through the shameful and powerless death of the crucified Messiah. Everything has to be reevaluated in light of the cross.
7. Paul has taken the central event at the heart of the Christian story – the death of Jesus – and used it as the lens through which all human experience must be projected and seen afresh.
8. What he demands of the Corinthians is something quite radical. He demands a thoroughly different way of viewing themselves.
9. Throughout this passage, we must bear in mind that the term “wisdom” in the Corinthian setting can refer to both
 - The possession of exalted knowledge
 - And the ability to express that knowledge in a powerful and rhetorically polished way.
10. Much of the controversy at Corinth may have been stirred up by the new Christians’ tendency to regard Paul and other Christian preachers as orators, competing for public attention and approval alongside other popular philosophers.

11. Paul's forceful rebuttal is designed to reframe the categories of the debate and to put the gospel in a category apart from other varieties of wisdom on offer in the popular marketplace of ideas.
12. In the present, the Christian community's focus on a crucified Christ appears to be the height of absurdity to those who do not believe. They call it *moria*, foolishness (root word for moron).
13. Those who are following Christ, however, recognize the cross for what it is,
 - The power of God changes the way they understand everything else.
14. He quotes a prophecy of Isaiah.

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." (1:19). Isaiah's point is that God-talk is cheap and that God's actions will shut the mouths of the wise talkers.
15. Philosophers, Torah scholars, and, most significantly, popular orators – all esteemed in Paul's day – fail to understand what is really going on in the world.
 - Their celebrated wisdom has failed to grasp the truth about God.
 - Paul suggests that this failure is itself a mysterious part of God's own purpose.
 - It is "in the wisdom of God" that the world has failed to know God through wisdom.
16. Jesus ushered in a new way of living and thinking; Jesus is the event that changed it all.
17. The scandal of this message is difficult for Christians of a later era to imagine.
 - To proclaim a crucified Messiah is to talk nonsense.
 - Crucifixion was a gruesome punishment administered by the Romans to "make an example" out of rebels or disturbers of the *Pax Romana* (peace of Rome).
 - As a particularly horrible form of public torture and execution, it was designed to demonstrate that no one should defy the powers that be.
 - Yet Paul's gospel declares that the crucifixion of Jesus is somehow the event through which God has triumphed over those powers.
 - Rather than confirming what the wisest heads already know, it shatters the world's system of knowledge.
18. The cross is vital to understanding reality in God's new age, moving us forward in the great divine push toward home. So, to enter the symbolic world of the gospel is to undergo a conversion of the imagination and see all values transformed by Jesus's foolish and weak death on the cross.

19. So, in verse 26, Paul turns the spotlight on the Corinthians themselves.
- This church is, on the whole, not a gathering of the elite.
 - Not many of them were highly educated, wealthy, or powerful. (reminiscent of the Hebrew people)
 - Nevertheless, as Paul insisted, they have been called by God as God's own covenant people.
 - The mixed socioeconomic status of the church was one of the most striking features of the early Christian movement.
20. One of the early Christian assemblies' distinctive characteristics was that it brought together people of diverse ranks and backgrounds who acknowledged one another as "brothers and sisters." This diversity may also have been one of the causes of trouble in the Corinthian church.
21. In Paul's view, the relatively low status of most of the Corinthian Christians is a sign of what God did on the cross and, therefore, is doing in the world: overturning expectations.
22. God is creating his new community of unimpressive material precisely to exemplify the power of his unmerited grace.
23. The Old Testament clearly states that no human flesh can stand before God's awesome holiness or contribute anything God needs.
24. Paul uses the Corinthian church to illustrate to themselves that God has elected to shame the wise and powerful of the world by creating a kingdom community made up of people whom the world scorns.
25. Christ Jesus *"became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption."*
26. Some have championed a form of "wisdom Christology" that celebrates Jesus as a teacher of wise sayings and an affirmer of human potential; nothing could be more opposite to what Paul means when he equates Christ with wisdom in this passage. His whole point is that it is the crucified Christ who is the wisdom of God.
27. If someone were to ask Paul to give the gospel of Jesus Christ in two or three words, there would be no question about his response. It wouldn't be "God is love" or "Love your neighbor" or "Keep the Commandments. It would be "Jesus crucified:
28. God's way of being among us is to get down on our level, Jesus is the way as well as the truth. And the way is crucifixion.

REFLECTIONS

1. In what ways do the problems plaguing the Corinthian Christians seem manifested in our world today?
2. Besides your faith in Jesus, what other sources of wisdom do you hold in high esteem? How do you balance your sources in a way that Paul could accept?
3. What tools or practices help you to “know” God?
4. What do you know of God?
5. How does the crucifixion of Christ and the new “wisdom” of Christ about the world inform how you see the world?
6. In what ways can you relate to the Corinthian Christians?

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1. First Corinthians, Interpretation, Richard B. Hays
 2. First Corinthians, New Covenant Commentary, B. J. Oropeza
 3. First Letter to the Corinthians, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, Roy E. Ciampa and Brian Rosner
 4. Feasting on the Word, David Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor Editors