



COMMENTARIES ON “1 CORINTHIANS”

Chapter 2

St. Paul begins 1 Corinthians 2 by continuing a primary theme from chapter one: refusing to substitute human philosophy and talented speaking for the gospel of Christ. He therefore reminds the Corinthians Christians that, when he visited the city (see Acts 18 and 20), he did not try to impress them with his learning or dynamic speaking; he taught only the gospel of Christ. As Fr. Lawrence Farley puts it, “No impressive dialogues with the philosophers for him! Nothing but the straight and unadorned proclamation of the story of Jesus, the plain and heartfelt telling of His words, His death, His Resurrection.”

You might wonder about his words in verse three: why and how was St. Paul weak, in fear, and trembling? To understand this verse, we need to know a little about St. Paul’s life before he arrived in Corinth. Ss. Paul and Silas worked in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9), where a crowd rioted against their preaching (and assaulted the household of St. Jason - my name saint - where Ss. Paul and Silas were staying). Ss. Paul and Silas then went to Berea, where St. Paul again needed to leave after crowds turned against them (Acts 17:10-14). Finally, just before going to Corinth, St. Paul preached in Athens, where his work drew little response from the sophisticated Athenians (Acts 17:16-33). St. Paul was therefore tired and discouraged, perhaps feeling himself unequal to the task to effectively preaching in a wicked city like Corinth.

He therefore did not give any kind of slick, sophisticated presentation to the Corinthians, but instead relied upon the strength of the simple gospel (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). This, St. John Chrysostom says, is the way to preach, “It does not belittle the gospel to say that it was preached without wisdom. On the contrary, this is the gospel’s great glory, the clearest sign that it is divine and that it comes from heaven...The demonstration by works and signs is more powerful than mere words.”

St. Paul continues that he - and other Christians - speak wisdom among those who are mature (2:6). The Greek word for “mature” - teleion - does not simply mean physically mature (and certainly doesn’t mean solely that a person is responsible as opposed to irresponsible or emotionally immature), but instead refers to spiritual growth and depth (see 1 Corinthians 3:1 and Hebrews 6:1). The early Christian Ambrosiaster explains St. Paul’s meaning:

The mature are those who preach the cross as wisdom because of the witness of Christ’s power at work. They know that actions speak louder than words. Their wisdom is not of this age but of the age to come, when the truth of God will be manifested to those who now deny it.

As to those who are not mature - political and cultural leaders and their like - the wisdom of God is incomprehensible; it seems, as St. Paul wrote in chapter one, mere foolishness. This wisdom of God is therefore a mystery to such individuals (2:7), just as it is today. If such people were not blinded by their

pride and self-satisfaction, St. Paul adds, “they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (2:8). This problem was prophesied in Isaiah 53:2-3:

He has no form or comeliness;
And when we see Him,
There is no beauty that we should desire Him.
He is despised and rejected by men,
A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.
And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him;
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

St. Paul would add that, not only did those who are wise in the ways of the world miss the significance of the person of Christ, but they are blind to all the marvelous plans of God. He demonstrates this by adapting Isaiah 64:4 and 65:17 in 1 Corinthians 2:9: without God’s grace, humans cannot comprehend the blessings God has in store for His people. St. Isaac of Nineveh elaborates: “When it says ‘which eye hath not seen, nor ear hath heard’ and the rest, Scripture has declared to us that the good things to come are incomprehensible and have no similarity to any thing here.”

This leads to an important question: if brilliant and accomplished thinkers and leaders cannot arrive at the truth on their own, then how can simple people like you and me know these deep and hidden things of God? Because “God has revealed them to us through His Spirit” (2:10). The Holy Spirit freely imparts to us spiritual wisdom (2:10-12), and it is for this reason that we pray during our morning prayers:

Now, therefore, illumine the eyes of my mind and open my mouth that I may learn your words, understand your precepts and do your will, and thus I will sing to you wholeheartedly and praise your all holy name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Verse thirteen gives us a very complicated statement: Christians speak only that which the Holy Spirit teaches, “comparing spiritual things with spiritual.” The general agreement of most commentators is that this means the Christian communicates spiritual truths using spiritual words. But does it mean to use spiritual words? These are more than complicated theological terms, and certainly more than mere pious-sounding phrases: they are words spoken with total reliance on the power of God. Christ told His followers that, when brought before authorities to defend the faith, the Holy Spirit would speak through them (Matthew 10:20; Mark 13:11), and St. Peter said that prophetic scripture came because the biblical writers were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). These are excellent examples of the fact that we cannot speak spiritual truths on our own, but must rely upon the strength and direction of God to do so.

After re-emphasizing that the person who is not illumined by the Holy Spirit - the “natural man” (1 Corinthians 2:14) - is incapable of spiritual discernment, St. Paul concludes with the point that “he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one” (2:15). This is not a statement against being accountable to another person, and certainly not a statement against the need for confession. Instead, it simply reinforces the point that a person indwelt and guided by the Holy Spirit can learn and understand spiritual truths, whereas the Christian will remain a mystery to his or her “unspiritual, soulless neighbors” (to quote Fr. Lawrence Farley). These people are incapable of knowing

the mind of the Lord (2:16, quoting Isaiah 40:13); since we have the mind of Christ. Having the “mind of Christ” is inseparable from accepting and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as Metropolitan Anthony Bloom says, “What the Church does is to look at every step of its development and its life for what St. Paul calls ‘the mind of Christ.’ To listen to the teaching of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is always young, always new, always modern.”