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Spirituality and the Corinthian Error

BY BOB DEWAAY

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The Corinthian Error Today

“The Holy Spirit is revealing the deep things of God to the church in these end times. God has sent to the church special prophets and teachers who are so in tune with the Holy Spirit that God has been able to reveal to them His purpose for the church, which had been hid throughout church history until this time.”

Enticing statements such as this commonly preface invitations to seminars or books on spirituality. Legitimately, Spirit-filled Christians hunger for a deeper walk with God. We long to better hear His voice and understand His ways. Occasionally we hear of a group which claims to have broken through to a new level of spirituality. What we may not realize, however, is that danger may lurk behind these offers of a higher spirituality.

I will seek to demonstrate this by using the problems in the Corinthian church and Paul’s correction thereof as a pattern for comparison. Paul said he spoke “...God’s wisdom in a mystery...” (1 Corinthians 2:7), what did he mean? Are there two or more categories of Christians? Are there levels of spirituality to be scaled by those who know the secrets? Do signs and wonders demonstrate the profundity of one’s spiritual life? What does it really mean to be spiritual? The answers to these and other questions can be found by a careful study of Paul’s controversy with the Corinthian church.

The church at Corinth prided itself in being spiritually progressed. They had spiritual manifestations and traced their spirituality to the teachings of certain leaders. Ironically, some of them felt that indeed they were more spiritual than Paul and were prone to not listen to him. This prompted Paul to “foolish-

ly” (2 Corinthians 11:2, 16, 19; 12:11) engage in defending himself by lowering himself to their criteria (visions and revelations) for the sake of showing that even by such standards he was not found wanting in regard to his spirituality. Paul’s preferred “boast” was in his “weaknesses” and distresses (2 Corinthians 11:21-30).

The Corinthian Error! False Spirituality

The nature of the Corinthian error is to be understood in context by examining the corrective statements given in Paul’s epistles to this church. In 1 Corinthians, after his salutations, Paul immediately addresses the situation. They had divisions as shown by Paul’s statement, “...each one of you is saying, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I of Apollos,’ and ‘I of Cephas,’ and ‘I of Christ.’” It is clear from chapters 1 and 2 of this epistle that they prided themselves in their claimed endowment of wisdom and were particularly impressed by eloquent preachers who had some sort of lofty “spiritual” wisdom to impart. They compared Paul to these preachers and found him wanting. Dr. Gordon Fee comments on this.

In chaps. 1-4, perhaps as a result of the ministry of Apollos, it seems that the Corinthians have begun to think of their new faith in terms of *sophia* (wisdom), as though, in com-

parison with others, it were the ultimate expression of divine *sophia*. Under these new criteria, neither Paul nor his gospel fared well. As to the content of wisdom, they considered his gospel and preaching to be something like “milk” for babes, whereas they had moved on to headier stuff designed for the “mature” (see 2:6; 3:1). Likewise as to the form of wisdom, they were particularly repelled by his lack of rhetorical skills that ordinarily accompanied *sophia* (cf. 1:17; 2:1-5).¹

Paul responds to this with a defense of his message, the cross.

The Corinthians loved wisdom and spiritual power. The cross, despised as it is and seemingly “foolish” (as opposed to “wise”), is the wisdom of God and the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:24). The preaching of this seemingly foolish message is God’s chosen means of bringing salvation to those who believe (1 Corinthians 1:21). Those who believe and thus accept the reproach of Christ and His cross are those who receive the Holy Spirit and are thus “spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2:12, Romans 8:9). Those who have received salvation and are regenerated by the Spirit of God have not done so because of their social position, human wisdom or personal strength (1 Corinthians 1:26-28). They have done so because of God’s gracious choice and calling of them in Christ Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:24, 26-31). To be in Christ by His grace is to be a spiritual person with the wisdom of God and the “mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:15, 16).

It is absolutely necessary to keep in mind this context (the false Corinthian “spirituality,” and their rejection of Paul and his “foolish” message of the cross) when studying and seeking to interpret passages in Corinthians, particularly 1 Corinthians 2. Many have missed the

context and have interpreted certain verses as though Paul were actually endorsing the Corinthian error!

For example, I heard one popular TV preacher teaching on 1 Corinthians 2:9-12 under the title "Revelation Knowledge." Revelation knowledge to this teacher is knowledge which comes from the human spirit as opposed to that which could be read in a book or heard with the ears. This "revelation knowledge" was promoted as a "deep mystery" to which only certain Christians were privy. The evidence of having received "revelation knowledge" as taught by this "faith teacher" was health and prosperity. Ironically, at the end of the TV broadcast, audio tapes explaining "revelation knowledge" were offered for sale.

If indeed knowledge that could be "seen with the eyes and heard with the ears" is inferior and useless for spirituality, why offer audio tapes? For that matter, if this were Paul's meaning, why did he write to the Corinthians an epistle to be read with their eyes and contemplated with their minds? Also, part of the Corinthian error was the dishonoring of the poor (1 Corinthians 11:18-22) and thus creating socioeconomic divisions in the church. By making "revelation knowledge," which results in and is evidenced by financial wealth the criterion for dividing "spiritual" Christians from other lesser ones, this particular preacher merely repeated the Corinthian error.

The cross and the preaching thereof is the wisdom of God and the power of God. Paul boldly and without shame asserts this in the early chapters of 1 Corinthians. For example he states, "And when I came to you brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." (1 Corinthians 2:2). The wisdom with which the Corinthians were enamored was probably analogous to that of Greek philosophers, such as those Paul encountered in Athens as described in Acts 17. In 1 Corinthians 1:22 Paul stated that the Greeks seek "wisdom." Some would like to interpret this as the pursuit of science, art, and

academics, and thus forbid such study for Christians. Yet nothing in the context indicates that these were the issues in Corinth.

The Greeks' search for wisdom had taken a decidedly pagan and idolatrous route. It was not that they had excluded spirituality; it is that they had excluded the true creator God. Thus Paul found Greeks ironically worshipping an "unknown" God (Acts 17:23). Paul told them that they were indeed "very religious in all aspects" (verse 22). Acts 17:18 states, "And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. And some were saying, 'What would this idle babbler wish to say?' Others, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,'-- because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection."

This should make Paul's meaning in 1 Corinthians 1 & 2 clear enough. He was not preaching against science, art or education, but against pagan idolatry which claimed to be religious but mocked Christ and the cross. Paul's message and method (boldly proclaiming Christ and the cross as God's means of bringing salvation) were the same in Athens as in Corinth. Yet some modern Christian writers claim that Paul so failed in Athens that he changed his method.² They say that he changed to a signs and wonders approach, rather than merely a preaching one. A comparison between Acts 17:18, & 31, 32 and 1 Corinthians 1:23 & 2:2 shows that Paul's basic message was the same in both places. Hebrews 2:4 says about the preaching of the apostles, "God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will." It is at least equally probable that the lack of signs and wonders (as far as recorded for us by Luke in Acts) in Athens was as much to do with God's will in the matter as with the apostle's "method."

In 1972, Francis Schaeffer saw some contemporary Christian groups misusing 1 Corinthians 1 & 2 and warned against it. In his book, *The New Super-Spirituality* he stated,

Not everybody associated with the

new super-spirituality is exactly the same, but often one of the identifying marks is the incorrect biblical exegesis of 1 Corinthians 1-2. Some incorrectly read these chapters as though they attacked the use of the intellect and reason as such, as though Paul despised the mind. Furthermore, there is a revival of the teaching that Paul made a mistake on Mars Hill when he used the intellect (Acts 17). Their view is that 1 Corinthians 1-2 show that Paul changed his mind in regard to the use of reason. This is a bad exegesis.³

Signs and Wonders

Those in the modern signs and wonders movement who would like to use Paul's supposed failure in Athens as proof of the inadequacy of preaching the gospel as the means to bring sinners to Christ also like to quote 1 Corinthians 2:4, 5 as proof. Paul stated, "And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God." They teach that Paul went from preaching to doing signs and wonders as a method of evangelization. Some even state that if one does not do a miraculous "sign" he has not "fully" preached the gospel. Yet the record of Acts 18 which concerns Paul's ministry in Corinth does not validate this view. For example:

"And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ." (Acts 18:4, 5)

When Paul went from Corinth to Ephesus, he then "...entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews." (Acts 18:19). Signs and wonders may have taken place as described in Hebrews 2 and elsewhere in Acts, but they hardly constituted Paul's primary method. "Reasoning in the synagogue" does not

equal “doing signs and wonders.”

Also, in 1 Corinthians 1:22, 23, Paul actually contrasted his message with the “signs” for which the Jews ask. The Jews seek signs, the Greeks seek wisdom. The true “sign” which God gave to the Jews was the crucified Messiah, raised from the dead. Jesus said:

“An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matthew 12:39b, 40)

Was this not the very sign that Paul boldly proclaimed and patiently taught in the synagogue of Corinth? Is this not the very sign (the crucified and resurrected Christ) that Paul called “the power of God and the wisdom of God”? (1 Corinthians 1:24). If so, then why try to make Paul at odds with both Jesus and himself by interpreting 1 Corinthians 2:4, 5 as some sort of signs and wonders technology which he could bring forth at will to cause people to become followers of Christ?

In 1 Corinthians 2:4, 5 Paul contrasts the wisdom of men with the power of God. What is the “wisdom of men”? Basically, it is the idea that through religion or philosophical speculation man can save himself without the offense of the cross. There are and have been numerous occultists who manifest signs and wonders, but not the “power of God” as Paul uses the term. The “power of God” is the power to bring salvation from eternal damnation and the power to change lives. This is exactly how Paul used the word “power” in 1 Corinthians 1:18 & 24. Is there any evidence that he changed his usage in 2:5?

This also applies to 1 Corinthians 4:20 where Paul speaks of the “power” of the kingdom of God. Some feel that this must be a reference to signs and wonders. Yet referencing the other passages in Paul’s writings where he mentions the kingdom of God in its present state rather than in its future manifesta-

tion gives us a different impression. For example:

“For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.” (Romans 14:17, 18)

This shows that character qualities (i.e. spiritual fruit manifested in changed lives) constitute the present nature of the kingdom working in God’s people. Leon Morris comments on **Romans 14:17**, “This is the only use of the expression the kingdom of God in Romans. Indeed, Paul does not make a great deal of use of the concept [the various verses where he does are listed]; all told he uses the word ‘kingdom’ only 14 times (Matthew has it 55 times; Mark, 20; Luke, 46; and John, 5). When he does use it, he mostly refers to the kingdom in its future aspect (the present may be only here and in 1 Corin. 4:20).”⁴ I would have to add Colossians 1:13 to this list, though there the phrase used is “the kingdom of His beloved Son.” In Colossians, the issue is deliverance from the domain of darkness and reconciliation with God, which are accomplished through the cross (Col. 1:14, 22; 2:14, 15).

Also consider **1 Thessalonians 2:12, 13**, “. . . so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God’s message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.” Here, the promise of our eternal inheritance in the kingdom of God is to motivate us to a change of behavior which is the result of the powerful working of God in our lives as believers. When verse 13 mentions “the word of God, which also performs its work in you,” the similarity to 1 Corinthians 4:20 is striking. The difference between Paul’s preaching with power and the mere “words” of the false teachers with whom the Corinthians were enamored is the ability of the

“word of the cross” (Paul’s message) to change lives. 1 Corinthians 4:20 says nothing about signs and wonders.

God’s Power Demonstrated Changed Lives!

For further evidence for this definition of the term “power” when connected with the gospel message, consider **1 Thessalonians 1:5**, “For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.” The result of this manifestation of the power of God was: “You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, have received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia,” (verses 6, 7) and “...you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God...” (verse 9). The power of God is manifested in changed lives. “Not in word only, but also in power,” means that the gospel changes lives by the Holy Spirit, not necessarily that unusual spiritual manifestations took place. The wisdom of the world has no power to change lives or solve people’s spiritual problems, whether or not it manifests supernatural “power displays.” If any further proof of Paul’s meaning by the term “power” when used in connection with His message is needed, **Romans 1:16** supplies it, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” The context in Romans 1 also concerns changed lives and “righteousness.”

The message of the world, “the lie,” will ultimately be broadcast in the context of great “power and signs and false wonders” (**2 Thessalonians 2:9**). It will have no real “power” in the sense we have seen in these other passages. It will not be able to save souls from judgment or change lives to conform to God’s will. I therefore conclude that when Paul uses the term “power” in 1 Corinthians 1 - 4 he is referring to the power of the gospel, through the cross, to save, deliver and change those who believe and

obey it. He is not particularly referring to signs and supernatural manifestations, although we know from Acts and the gospels that these indeed do often follow the preaching of the gospel.

God's "wisdom" and the world's "wisdom" are diametrically opposed. As 1 Corinthians 2:4, 5 shows, only God has the power to solve man's basic problems, which are moral and spiritual. So, Paul goes on to state:

"Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." (1 Corinthians 2:6-8)

This passage has also suffered much misuse in recent years. Some seem to think that Paul is promoting what he is actually refuting. The use of the terms "mature," "hidden," and "mystery" have caused some to suppose that Paul teaches a dualistic Christianity along the lines of the Greek mystery religions or Gnosticism. They claim to have a "special, deeper revelation" that the church has missed through the centuries, only now to be discovered by some latter day prophet. Many cults have used this theme and, sadly, many unsuspecting Christians who are lured by the promise of a "deeper revelation" have also been misled. They claim that they have a level of maturity that is not reached by common Christians and that, therefore, God has trusted them with deep mysteries of the faith to which the rest of us mundane, unspiritual Christians are not privy. Before joining such a group in order to participate in their more profound spirituality, we ought to first seek to understand what Paul meant by these words.

God's Wisdom

We have already seen that God's "wisdom" is Christ, the crucified Messiah,

which seems to the world to be foolishness. In fact Paul here says that "...if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." Why? Because they were in actuality only furthering the plan of God for our salvation, which plan they are now rejecting. As Gordon Fee states,

*"Thus the divine irony. The very ones who were trying to do away with Jesus by crucifying him were in fact carrying out God's prior will... Instead of crucifying a messianic pretender, they killed 'the Lord of glory' himself, the very one who, as Lord of all the ages, is therefore Lord of the final glory that is both his and his people's ultimate destiny. The Pauline irony, of course, is that the Corinthians in pursuing *sophia* are pursuing what belongs to this age, which is passing away and whose rulers were implicated in the divine irony."*⁵

What is contrasted is the world's "wisdom," which is both autonomous and opposed to God's plan and revealed will, and God's wisdom as revealed through the cross. The "mature" here refers to Christians. Paul will point out the carnality of the Corinthians in chapter 3. This is probably also ironic, since they consider Paul's teaching rather basic and unspiritual compared to their own supposed advanced spirituality. The "mature" are actually Christians who willingly embrace the cross and allow God to work in their lives by His power to change them according to His will and purpose.

Dr. Fee rejects the idea that Paul is speaking of "deeper" truths that the Corinthians could not yet handle. He says, "The argument of the whole paragraph, especially the language "for our glory" (v. 7), "for those who love him" (i.e., "us"; v. 9), "revealed it to us" (v. 10), and "we have received the Spirit who is from God" (v. 12), implies that Paul is, as earlier, addressing the whole church and drawing them all into the orbit of what he is saying. Most likely the terminology is theirs. In their rejection of Paul, they think he is treating

them like mere babes, feeding them only with milk, while they perceive themselves to have advanced to maturity (cf. 4:8)."⁶ The irony is that if anyone is immature, it is the Corinthians. Yet Christians, in general, are "the mature" in 1 Corinthians 2:6.

In the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, the meaning of *mustērion*, Greek for "mystery" is discussed as it pertains to this section of 1 Corinthians 2.

The section 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, which receives its theme from the phrase quoted from 2:7, arouses at first the impression that Paul is presenting a mystery teaching which is designed only for the mature and which must be kept from the immature. This is how he actually begins in 2:6, in clear polemical dependence on the Corinthian Gnostics, whose terminology may be seen plainly throughout the section. In fact, however, Paul never abandons the *logos tou staurou* [word of the cross] which has been proclaimed to the whole community. Indeed, he is resisting the ecstatic demand of Corinthian mystery *gnosis* [knowledge] for a *sophia* [wisdom] which will go beyond the message of the cross, and pointing to the wisdom of God which in this message is concealed from the world and its rulers, but revealed to those endowed with the Spirit of God.⁷

"Clear polemical dependence" means that Paul is using the terminology of his opponents, redefining it, and using the same words to debate with them and refute them. The irony is that the supposedly "mature" Corinthians who had obtained special "wisdom" and "gnosis" and were supposedly thus privy to special "mysteries" which made them advanced and elite compared to Paul and other Christians, were actually "babes" (1 Corinthians 3:1) and thus immature. The wisdom is the cross and the knowledge we need about spiritual things comes to us through the work of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The true "mystery" is God's plan of

redemption, previously hidden from the veiled, sin laden eyes of the world, but now revealed in Christ and publicly proclaimed throughout the world. The immaturity of the Corinthians is shown in their willingness to leave this message and go after secret wisdom supposedly revealed only to certain privileged ones, molded after the manner of itinerant Greek philosophers, “enlightened” Gnostics or the like. They even imagined that Apollos or perhaps Peter or even Paul himself was such a teacher (ch. 1:12; 3:4-6; 4:6, 7), which idea Paul is vehemently rejecting.

Carnal Christians?

The way to become an immature “carnal” Christian (if there really is such a person) is to seek to go beyond the cross and the revealed word of God. In the case of the Corinthians, those who had been ironically considering themselves more advanced and knowledgeable about spiritual mysteries and, therefore, more spiritual than Paul and others who knew only his teaching. In fact they were “babes.” Immaturity often masquerades as spirituality. The result of this type of spirituality is factions—groups of Christians whose identity is found in the unique teachings of their favorite revealer of deeper “spiritual knowledge.”

As Paul continues in chapter 2, he assures us that what God has prepared for us has been revealed by the Holy Spirit. In verse 10 he states, “For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.” “Revealed” is in the aorist tense in the Greek, signifying a point of time in the past. A. T. Robertson states “This revelation took place, at the ‘entry of the Gospel into the world...’”⁸ It is only through a work of grace, wrought by the Holy Spirit, that we know God’s purposes. “Us” in this verse signifies Christians in general, the church. This is not therefore referring to some new “deeper” revelation that only certain privileged Christians have because of following a particularly gifted teacher, philosopher, or prophet. The content of this revelation is the

very message of the cross to which Paul has been continually referring in this epistle. Paul wrote:

“Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith.”
(Romans 16:25-26)

The mystery is the word of the cross.

Christians have the Holy Spirit and have received the promises, purpose and life of God as part of the gift of grace provided in Christ through the cross. The Holy Spirit works in us, changing us, revealing to us the “*the things freely given to us by God*” (2 Corinthians 2:12). If this is so, there is no need for extra-Biblical revelations known only to certain elite prophets or philosophers, who fancy themselves to be spiritual and possessing special “gnosis.” What a tragedy that the very passages of the New Testament that were given by God to protect us from a false spirituality based on deeper mysteries, wisdom, and spiritual knowledge are so commonly misused so as to teach that very thing.

Categorized Christianity

Paul is not teaching that we should view the church as consisting of two (or more) groups of Christians, the spiritually elite and the common folk, or the “haves” and the “have nots.” To teach such a thing would go counter to the whole message of the epistle, that Christ is not divided and that, therefore, we ought not to create factions in the church. There may indeed be “babes” as Paul ironically calls the Corinthians. There are those who build with “wood, hay, stubble” or “gold and precious stones.” Yet these should not be viewed as hard and fast categories, with some special revelation or spiritual experience catapulting a person from one into the other. As a matter of fact, there is an

entire continuum of Christians with various gifts, functions, degrees of progress in the area of sanctification and spiritual development. These are all one in Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12), and are not to be viewed as being in categories defined by man (such as “carnal Christians” and “spiritual Christians”). Only God will sort out such matters, and that at the final judgment (1 Corinthians 3:13).

Also, the pride that is evident in the attitude of the Corinthians (see 2 Corinthians 10 etc.) causes those who would like to define such categories to put themselves into the most favorable one. Have you ever heard a preacher state “there are certain advanced, spiritually gifted Christians with deep knowledge and revelations which set them apart from others, but unfortunately neither I nor any of my associates are one of them”? Whatever the experience or endowment that is deemed to be the separating point between the elite and the common Christians always seems to be the one that the leaders of the “elite” group have. It’s amazing how that works! This situation leads to personality cults.

Paul addresses this:

“Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God. Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that in us you might learn not to exceed what is written, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.” (1 Corinthians 4:5, 6)

If Christianity is defined by the Bible which describes “*the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*” (Jude 3), then the issue of which preacher we follow or which group we deem more advanced will lose its significance.

Assuming that Paul means “Scripture” by his phrase “what is written,” the real issue is whether the teach-

ing is Biblical (in Paul's case who wrote inspired Scripture, whether it was truly delivered to him by Christ as he claimed), not whether some eloquent preacher, be it even Paul or Apollos, has managed to get for himself a large following. When Paul tells us not to pass judgment before the time, he is not suggesting that we should not seek to determine whether certain teachings are Biblical, otherwise he would be negating the very thing he teaches in verse 6. What he is saying is that we ought not to engage in the process of exalting one preacher or group over against another for the sake of creating factions and divisions based on personalities or our human assessment of eloquence or seeming spirituality.

There is a question about whether "what is written" here refers to Scripture. Some have put forth other suggestions. Responding to some of these ideas, Leon Morris writes "This is possible. But, in light of Paul's habit, it is more likely that there is a reference to Scripture, even though no passage is explicitly cited. Paul will be referring to the general sense of the Old Testament, as the rendering of RSV brings out, 'that you may learn by us to live according to scripture.' We may fairly conjecture that 'not beyond what is written' was a catch-cry familiar to Paul and his readers, directing attention to the need for conformity to Scripture."⁹

Gordon Fee says about various ideas concerning this verse, "Of these solutions, the one that sees Paul as referring to previously cited scripture is more likely. If so, then this first purpose clause would be speaking again to the matter of wisdom and boasting, that they should 'live according to scripture' and not boast illegitimately (1:29, 31)."¹⁰ However, he does state that this is less than certain.

I believe that "what is written," whether it meant to the Corinthians "the Old Testament," some previously written document that they and Paul were aware of but is not extant, or some previously cited passages, the application for us has to be Scripture. What other means do we have deciding what to believe and obey that would fit the

context of not choosing one preacher versus another? The context demands that "what was written" was authoritative in determining the correct belief and behavior of the Corinthians without the need for following certain personalities. Only the Scripture can fulfill that role for us.

Yet the elitist, super-spirituality that some modern teachers delight to see in 1 Corinthians 2 results in the very thing Paul is seeking to avoid—the choosing of one preacher against another. A good approach upon hearing one of these "deeper revelations" of God's purpose is to ask yourself, "Could I have ever have gotten this teaching from studying the Bible"? If not, there is reason to be suspect. If the number one requirement for developing a spiritual teaching is to have an imagination wild enough to be suitable for the writing of science fiction books, we have big troubles in the church! Being entertaining is not the same as being Biblical or being "spiritual." Yet many seem to make such equations in this day of television Christianity.

Paul Unspiritual?

The amazing fact that some of the Corinthians had a dim view of Paul's level of spirituality can be seen by the responses he makes to them about this in 1 & 2 Corinthians. Gordon Fee remarks about this: "They stand over against him on almost every issue... What right does he have to speak to them as he did in the Previous Letter, since there is considerable doubt, based on their own criteria, whether he is truly *pneumatikos* (spiritual) or a prophet (cf. 14:37)?"¹¹ Let us examine several of the criteria for spirituality against which the Corinthians compared Paul.

1) Wisdom - As we have already seen, wisdom was a criterion for spirituality for the Corinthians. Paul's message of a crucified Messiah was exceedingly foolish to their minds. They looked for some deeper message than the cross, and evidently did not view the message of the cross as spiritual, but rather as foolish. Perhaps had Paul come with some sophisticated sounding, spiritual theory,

replete with levels of enlightenment, processes for advancement, and spiritual secrets to be discovered, they would have accepted Paul as spiritually advanced. However, Paul said "...I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." What a disappointment; next year the Corinthians would have to get a more exciting speaker for their "deeper life" seminar! Their wisdom was not of the simple but profound variety found in Proverbs or the Book of James, but was derived from complicated, Gnostic, extra-biblical, spiritual theories. Do we not see the same trend in the church today? Whether from the realm of psychology, or that of personal revelation, seminars are held which present a complicated form of esoteric "wisdom" which could never have been found from studying the Bible.

2) Rhetorical Eloquence - The following is Paul's quote of what his Corinthian critics had to say about him: "For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive, and his speech contemptible.'" (2 Corinthians 10:10). Paul admits his comparative weakness in this matter in 1 Corinthians 2:1, "...I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom..." Perhaps this is why some had chosen Apollos (1:12) over Paul, since his elocutionary skill is documented in Acts 18:24. This is not to say that at the time Paul wrote the Corinthians that Paul and Apollos had different messages. It is to say that this false criterion for spirituality made them susceptible to any number of strange teachers and teachings. Once a false view of spirituality is received, then the holders thereof become prey to whoever excels in that realm. How many of us have not witnessed persons being sold what they did not want and could not afford by an extremely persuasive salesman? If this talent is translated into a basis for judging spirituality, then our spiritual leaders will be "silver tongued" orators with the ability to sway the crowds with emotion-laden appeals, regardless of content. This we have witnessed often in very recent history. Many times the results

have been disastrous.

3) Financial Wealth & Social Position

- As the apostle defends his message (the cross) to the Corinthians, he seeks to get them to see that they mostly fell short even by their own gauge for judgment. He said, "For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble." (1:26). Christians had mostly not come from the ranks of the nobility. James uses this same reasoning to correct Christians who make class distinctions (James 2:1-7). If the rich drag Christians into court, why should Christians who were mostly chosen by God from the ranks of the poor, make financial wealth a sign of special honor and spirituality? Yet the Corinthians did this very thing, even going to far as to shame the poor at their communion service (see 1 Corinthians 11:18-22). In a powerful appeal to the Corinthians to see the wrongness of their standards, in 1 Corinthians 4:7-14, Paul compares their relative ease and "richness" to his hunger, thirst and poverty (verses 11-13). Yes indeed, by Corinthian standards, Paul was unspiritual! Do we not have the same sorrowful situation today with the "health and wealth gospel" so often heard on TV? Is not wealth and social position being again made a standard against which someone's spirituality is to be judged?

4) Speaking in Tongues - It is clear from the statements made in 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14 that this church put a premium upon the gift of tongues in particular, and practiced it publicly to the point of creating chaos in their meetings. As Paul finishes correcting this situation, he states "If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment." (14:37). They evidently felt that their public spiritual manifestations, particularly tongues, demonstrated their spirituality. Did Paul accept this standard? In this case he could have fared well, but did not appear to in the eyes of his critics. Paul spoke in tongues alright, but in private! He said "I thank God, I

speak in tongues more than you all; however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind, that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue." (14:18,19). Though tongues was a gift that had been received by Paul and used in his prayers, it was not something he practiced in public for the purpose of demonstrating his spirituality. Tongues was the Corinthian criterion for spirituality, not Paul's. Today many people foolishly think that the spirituality of a Christian group is to be gauged by the number of utterances in tongues commonly heard in their meetings.

5) Visions - The book of 2 Corinthians reveals yet another of their criteria for judging spirituality—visions. They assumed that Paul was deficient in this regard also, since they had not heard him speak of his own visions, or for that matter boldly defend his own level of spirituality as compared to those "false apostles" (2 Corinthians 11:13) who were influencing them. Paul loathes defending himself, particularly in regard to matters of which others boast. He prefers to boast in his "weakness" (11:30). For this reason, several times he calls himself "foolish" (for example see 2 Corinthians 11:17) for doing so, but goes on to share his own experiences in the Lord, hoping to win over the Corinthians and thus save them from following false apostles.

In this context, we read "*Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord*" (2 Corinthians 12:1). Yes indeed, Paul had been the recipient of visions and revelations. The result? - "*And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me - to keep me from exalting myself!*" After receiving a "no" answer from God upon asking for deliverance, Paul concluded "*Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me.*" Visions and revelations were the Corinthian measure of spirituality, not Paul's, though he had received such. Yet today,

we commonly hear preachers promoting their own supposed advanced spirituality based on their visions and revelations. They would like us to believe that they have "favored son" status with God, and thus have been given a "hot-line to heaven." Crowds flock to their meetings hoping to hear a new word from the Lord. It seems that little has changed since the day of the Corinthian error.

Who Is Spiritual?

The last part of 1 Corinthians 2 speaks of a spirituality that comes from God rather than from the world. God has revealed His purpose for us through the Holy Spirit. We have received the Holy Spirit, and therefore are capable of understanding the things that God has prepared for us. The world does not receive or understand these things because of blindness due to hardness and rebellion, and failure to have responded to the gospel so as to be saved and receive the Holy Spirit. For this reason, there is a contrast. Paul says "*Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God...*" (1 Corinthians 2:12). Who are "we"? "We" are those who have received the Holy Spirit. Who has received the Holy Spirit?, certain elite Christians who have advanced beyond the rest? **Romans 8:9** is very clear, "*...you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.*" If we are indeed Christians, we have the Holy Spirit. If we do not have the Holy Spirit, we are not Christians. Therefore, the last section of 1 Corinthians 2 is contrasting Christians with the world or non-Christians, not spiritual Christians with unenlightened or lesser Christians.

On what basis did we receive the Holy Spirit? Was it because we had advanced spiritually enough that God rewarded us with the presence of the Holy Spirit? We received the Holy Spirit by faith as a gift of grace, through the cross. What things does the Holy Spirit reveal to us? The text says "...things

freely given to us by God..." These things "we speak" Paul says in the next verse. Of what things did Paul speak? They are written for us in this and other epistles. God has given us forgiveness of sins (through the cross), eternal life (through the cross), the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit (through the cross), fellowship with Him and His church (through the cross), the blessed privilege of preaching the gospel of salvation to the lost (through the cross), and the promise of the resurrection (through the cross). These are the "deep" things of God! These are those things that are freely given us which cannot be received by the world. **1 Corinthians 2:14** says, "...a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised." Thus the Athenian philosophers mocked and ridiculed Paul because he preached Jesus and the resurrection from the dead. They were natural men and found Paul's message of a resurrection to be quite foolish to their own minds.

Paul concludes the chapter with a quote from the Old Testament (Is. 40:13) to prove this point and then with the statement, "But we have the mind of Christ." To whom does "we" refer?—Christians! Why? Because through the cross we have received the Holy Spirit. We did not get the mind of Christ at a seminar by a prophet or revelator with a new, secret message from God! Because of the mind of Christ we are willing to listen to the "foolish" message of the cross. There is indeed a deep, profound wisdom, previously a mystery, now revealed to spiritually minded persons. It is the cross!

Gordon Fee concludes his commentary on 1 Corinthians 2 with a very profound comment. He states,

This paragraph has endured a most unfortunate history of application in the church. Paul's own point has been almost totally lost in favor of an interpretation nearly 180 degrees the opposite of his intent. Almost every form of spiritual elitism, "deeper life" movement, and

"second blessing" doctrine has appealed to this text. To receive the Spirit according to their special expression paves the way for people to know "deeper truths" about God. One special brand of elitism surfaces among some who have pushed the possibilities of "faith" to the extreme, and regularly make a "special revelation" from the Spirit their final court of appeal. Other "lesser" brothers and sisters are simply living below their full privilege in Christ. Indeed some advocates of this form of spirituality bid fair to repeat the Corinthian error in its totality.¹²

Dr. Fee has described the problem succinctly. It is time to learn the truth about this matter and cease this mistreatment of the Word of God.

Conclusion

True spirituality is first and foremost found in embracing the offense of the cross. The term "cross" in this context means "the whole substitutionary work of Christ." This includes the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. This includes believing the truth about the Incarnation, as described in the Gospels. Christ is fully human and fully God. This includes the bodily ascension of Christ and our expectation for His bodily return. All of this was clearly a part of Paul's message of the cross. As Romans 6 teaches, the cross also must do God's work in us. We are crucified with Christ, and our whole motive for living changes. We are no longer slaves to sin, but to righteousness. Living to serve Him, by faith, through grace, is the fruit of the cross in our life. Willingness to embrace the shame and disapproval of the world for our public confession of Christ, the crucified Messiah, is included in the reception of the "wisdom" of God—the cross. This is spirituality which is pleasing to God.

True spirituality is to have the Holy Spirit. This means that we have been born again, spiritually regenerated. This is the case for all true Christians. Whatever subsequent endowments of

blessing, growth, infillings of the Holy Spirit, sanctification, reception of spiritual gifts, etc. we may receive are the natural and progressive outgrowths of our relationship with Christ and are not to be seen as creating classifications of Christians. There is no spiritual aristocracy in the church. Christ is the head and we are all members of the body of Christ.

True spirituality involves following the Word of God alone as the authoritative declaration of God's will and purpose for the church. We must follow Paul's instruction and "not go beyond what is written." Studying, learning, obeying and teaching the Bible is a pure and holy outworking of spirituality. We love God, we love one another and we love the truth. This is spiritual, and it is only true because of what God graciously has done for us through the cross. May we reject the modern substitutes which are being offered. They sound spiritual, but are actually carnal.

End Notes

1. Fee, G. D. (1987) NICNT 1 Corin. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans)8, 9
2. For Example: John Wimber, Power Evangelism (1986) Harper & Row 50
3. Schaeffer, F. A. (1972) The New Super-Spirituality, C. W. Crossway, 393.
4. Morris, Leon (1988) Romans, Eerdmans p. 488
5. (Fee:106, 107)
6. (Fee: 102, 103)
7. TDNT Eerdmans Vol. 4, 819
8. Robertson, A. T. Word Pictures in the New Testament, Vol. 4 page 86
9. Morris, Leon (1958) Tyndale Bible Commentaries, 77, 78
10. (Fee: 169)
11. (Fee: 8)
12. (Fee: 120)

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Gospel of Grace Fellowship

P.O. Box 390334

Edina, MN 55439-0334

ggf.church

cicministry.org

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