

1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-5

INTRODUCTION

As a Christian church we are faced with one question that our forefathers were also faced with. That question is how will the church survive? Is the future for the church not bleak? The facts and figures show annually that there is a decline in church attendance, congregations are ageing and many churches are closing or are just run down. Then we have the social trends that appear to be going against the church.

Trends such as: rising crime, marriage breakdown, immorality, children growing up with no Christian influence at all. We are so used to all of this that if we see a drop in crime figures we are ecstatic as a result.

It seems that our whole nation is completely ignorant of Christian truth ask someone in the street what is the message of the church and there would hardly be anyone who could give a good answer to that question. In our schoolchildren the average child knows little of the message of the church, our young people want nothing to do with it and our young couples look at us as if we had two heads if we attempt to talk to them about the Lord. On top of all this we live in a land where the emphasis is on more and more entertainment and excitement. We live in a nation that is proud and self-confident it has all the answers and it claims it has no need for the church, the bible or God or at least so it thinks. I think I am right in saying that we live in an almost pagan society. It might be full of religion but little real meaningful biblical Christianity.

The state of the world leaves the church worrying about its very future and the church is facing an enormous question. The question is how is the church of Jesus Christ going to reach the people of our generation with the message of Jesus Christ?

The danger for the church is to see our generation as unique and our problems as special, we can think that no other generation has faced the hardness and indifference to Christian truth that we face. It might be true that we will have to go back some time in our church history to find our nation at such low spiritual ebb but our situation is not new for Paul found himself in Corinth in a very similar situation.

Corinth was just as hard in fact it was probably harder than many of our own towns and cities in our generation. Corinth was full of false worship, the people worshipped all sorts of gods and they even worshipped Caesar. The city was corrupt and immorality was rife, let us ask ourselves a very important question as we continue to work our way through this book.

1. HOW DID PAUL REACH THE PEOPLE IN CORINTH?

Now in order to put this in the context of the passage we are considering, we must remember that Paul is dealing with the superiority of God's wisdom over the wisdom of this world. We have seen God's superior wisdom in a number of ways starting from chapter 1:18 and now in these verses that we are looking at tonight Paul sees God's superior wisdom in the way that the wisdom of the gospel is presented.

Now we have the answer to this question that I posed in verse 2. In the midst of all the great philosophies that existed in Corinth Paul preached the simple message of Jesus Christ and him crucified. Now in the context of Corinth which loved talking about the many philosophies that existed by the so called wise men Paul was determine to make known the simple but great truth about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul was convinced about his message he was convinced that the only thing that could change Corinth was this message. Now to everyone else in Corinth this message was foolish, simplistic and not worth listening too but Paul knew it was the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes. Now what about our own modern world how can this land of ours be rescued from its terrible moral and spiritual decline?

I trust that you are convinced; as Paul was that it is only by proclaiming the simple message of the cross that this nation can be changed. Paul could have debated with the so-called wise men in Corinth about the latest philosophy that was doing the rounds but he knew that the city of Corinth would remain in its sin unless he preached the message of the gospel, that message consisted of two things.

Paul told the people who Jesus was and what he did. He told the people what he saw and heard and what had been revealed to him by God (v 1) and why Jesus came. Now this message is the same message that God's true church preaches today, it is the message that we must preach and proclaim to our town and to our generation. People sometimes ask what our church offers people. My reply is always the same we offer people the gospel we offer them Christ and Him crucified. If people come back and ask what else does our church offer, then my answer is the same for outside of this great and glorious message we as a church have nothing else to offer to this world of ours. If people reject this offer then we have nothing else worth offering them.

The temptation that the church faces today and as the decline in people attending church continues the temptation is to preach a message, which is more acceptable, more appealing more entertaining more light and welcoming in order to make it more popular.

But that is a mistake because the message of the church has always been unpopular Paul's message was unpopular and unacceptable to the people of his day and his generation (1 Corinthians 1:21-23). People didn't want to here this message they were just as hard in Paul's day as they are today.

Our message will become increasingly more unpopular as we stand up to the trends within our nation. On the religious front the pressure on the church is to say that all roads lead to God. But to say that is to deceive people for it is a lie, the truth is there is only one way to God and that is through Jesus Christ the Son of God. To claim that Christ is the only way to God will increasingly make us more and more unpopular in the religious world and in the world in general. But we must be like Paul and have the determination that is needed because Paul was not giving an opinion but he was saying what God says and so are we when we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

This message is not the message of any preacher therefore we cannot just take it or leave it but this is God's message to our town and our world, this is what God says therefore to reject it has far more serious consequences than many people actually think.

2. WHAT IS IT THAT MADE SUCH A SIMPLE MESSAGE SUCCESSFUL IN CORINTH (vs. 1 & 3-4)?

We are told that Paul's success was not based on his own words alone it didn't depend on his own great oratory skills or his wonderful ability to persuade people (v 1). Paul did have many gifts in preaching but he did not depend on those gifts to make his ministry successful. Nor did he try to impress people with his excellent use of words. In fact Paul says that he came to Corinth in "weakness, fear and with much trembling" (v 3).

Paul came to Corinth in weakness even though he was very gifted and could probably hold his own when debating with the wise people of Corinth. Paul had an intense sense of his own

inadequacy. He came to Corinth in total dependence upon the Lord to use his preaching to convict and convince the Corinthians of their need of salvation. The Lord did not disappoint Paul for his words were accompanied by the God's power (v 4).

It was God who convicted people, convinced and converted them through the words that Paul preached. In fact no one can be a Christian, no one can be changed by the message alone, no one can be persuaded by the speaker alone but only by the power of God as he reveals His truth to us through the preached word (vs. 8-10 and 13-14).

You see when this simple message is preached in total dependence upon the Lord to work through his word; then there is a power that accompanies the preaching God does something through his word as it is preached. Christian people this evening just think about your own conversion experience. How many sermons did you hear before you came to faith in Christ. What was it that made you decide to follow Jesus Christ?

It was not the preacher but God's power at work in you implanting new life within you as you listened to his word (Acts 16:11-15).

Why is it that we know so little of God's power within our churches today? Why is it that we are affecting so few people with the gospel in our own town? Is one reason to do with the fact that we are preaching the gospel in our own power, is one reason the fact that we are depending upon our own abilities and gifting to convince men and women of the truth? Is it possible that we who are preachers think that we have all that it takes to convert people?

We might never say that but perhaps the way we prepare and preach is actually showing how much we are depending upon ourselves and how little we are depending upon God. Perhaps most preachers today spend hours on their sermon construction and rightly so but yet we spend so little time praying and seeking the Lord's help in preparation and in preaching. As congregations we are not much better than preachers are we?

How often do you pray for the preacher during the week? What do you pray for when you do pray for him? Do we pray consistently and constantly that his preaching will be accompanied by the power of the Spirit and every sermon will be a demonstration of the Spirit's power? Perhaps one reason why we are seeing so little accomplished spiritually through our preaching today is that we do not expect much to be accomplished.

Perhaps we are not desperate enough for God to come and work in our own congregation. Perhaps we have become content with sermons that are helpful but not really powerful. I am not pointing the finger at anyone but myself for so often I have spent much time in study and little time in prayer, seeking God and his blessing through the preaching of his word.

More than that by the size of our church prayer meetings you are probably in the same boat as I am.

So how can we return to that much needed power in our pulpits again? Surely the first step is acknowledging our need for it. That will involve humility on the part of every preacher and every member of the congregation. It will involve serious prayer asking God to burden us with a desire for power in our preaching. Secondly powerful preaching will involve the preacher and the listeners getting back to making living holy lives a priority.

It involves daily study of God's word, daily praying and daily application of God's word into every area of our lives. Perhaps if we get back to the two priorities of acknowledging our desperate need for power and in making holy living a priority then perhaps God will come in power in our churches through the preaching of His word.

You know churches today seek much time looking for better methods to reach our world but God is simply looking for better men and women. God is looking for prayerful men and women holy people who humbly depend upon God to help them live consistently holy lives in this world or sin and darkness.

3. THE RESULT OF POWERFUL PREACHING (v 5)

Paul knew what was at stake here. If people were persuaded by Paul's words and abilities then the people would rely upon human wisdom and ultimately human wisdom does not save you. Two Pastors were speaking one day when a man in one of the pastor's church passed by. The pastor said to the other Pastor "do you see that man he is one of my converts." He then went on to explain that he is only a convert of the Pastor but he is not a convert to Christ. He was a disciple of the Pastor but not of Christ. That is what happens when men and woman are impressed with certain preachers. They will travel miles to hear their preacher but they might not know anything about the grace of God in their heart. To be fair it is often not the preacher's desire to have people rely upon him or follow him.

They long for God to move in power but for some reason the personality or the style of the preacher attracts the person and they become committed to the preacher without being committed to Christ.

However the result of preaching, which is truly accompanied by the power of the Spirit, is that people are converted and know God's power in their lives. As a result they will depend daily upon God's power and grace and long for His power to touch the lives of others. Is it no wonder that Paul felt so inadequate when preaching at Corinth?

Is it any surprise that he was desperate not to impress the people with clever words but longed for a demonstration of the Spirit's power in the lives of the Corinthians?

So as I conclude what is it that will change this nation and bring growth to the church? The answer is very simply. We must preach clearly the truth of the gospel. We must do so with a very real sense of inadequacy and with a realisation that the success of the gospel depends upon the Spirit's power and not the abilities of the preacher.

C. H. Spurgeon captured this well with his immortal words "The power that is in the gospel does not lie in the eloquence of the preacher; otherwise men would be converters of souls. Nor does it lie in the preacher's learning otherwise it would consist in the wisdom of men. We might preach till our tongues rotted, till we should exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless there were the mysterious power going with it – the Holy Ghost changing the will of man."

Let us be men and women who understand this need for power and let us pray until God sends his power upon the preaching of the gospel in this church and in our town and in our nation.

Amen

1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-16

INTRODUCTION

Paul has been contrasting the wisdom of the people of Corinth with the wisdom of God. To most of the Corinthians the wisdom of God was foolishness but to those who believed Paul's message in Corinth this wisdom saved their souls. In this section that we are looking at Paul is still dealing with the subject of wisdom and he makes two points about divine wisdom.

1. TRUE WISDOM IS NOT HUMANLY DISCOVERED (vs. 6-9)

The gospel, which Paul preached, was a message of wisdom but it was not recognised as wise by the people of Corinth but only those who were 'mature' (v 6) meaning those who have come to faith in Christ. It is those who accept the gospel and turn in faith to the Christ of the gospel that understand and recognise this gospel as God's pure wisdom (v 6).

God's wisdom is not like the wisdom of this world there was nothing like it in all of Corinth even though Corinth was the centre for human wisdom. The rulers of Corinth were considered to be very wise in the eyes of the people but God's wisdom is way above their wisdom for these so called wise rulers and these rulers and their wisdom were coming to nothing or as another translation has it are 'passing away' (v 6). However God's wisdom is eternal. But God's wisdom is also a secret wisdom (v 7) the word is really the word 'mystery,' which means truth once, concealed now revealed.

In other words at one time the gospel in its full glory was concealed we only had hints and shadows of this gospel throughout the Old Testament period. But now this secret has been fully revealed with the coming of Christ and with the proclamation of the gospel. But only those who have come to embrace it have really discovered the revealed gospel; to everyone else it is still concealed.

Therefore the gospel is not a secret in the sense that only a few can hear or discover the gospel, Paul preached the gospel clearly and openly but the gospel is a secret to most in Corinth who have not yet had their eyes opened to its truth and relevance. However to those who God has revealed this gospel truth to and have come to understand it fully and have turned in faith to embrace it then this truth, which once was concealed from them, has now been revealed to them.

But this mystery wisdom is not something that mankind with their intelligence can see clearly. The truth is clear to understand but there must be a spiritual opening of the eyes of our heart if one is going to embrace the gospel. This is why Paul says that this wisdom was hidden but not from everyone. For God had decided in eternity that he was going to save a people for himself.

The way that he was going to do it was through the gospel of His Son who came to earth lived died rose again so that we could be saved and ultimately brought to glory. Now this is the wisdom that has been preached in Corinth and this is the wisdom that has been revealed to those who believe it. Again the emphasis is on the fact that God's wisdom is not discovered purely by human means, God's wisdom is spiritual and therefore it must be spiritually revealed.

This is exactly how God had planned it from the very beginning in his great wisdom God decided to save people and the method he would use was the gospel.

The application for us is twofold. We must make sure that gospel proclamation is at the centre of all that we do. In our church we have changed our evangelistic methods in an attempt to reach out to more people, but there is one thing that we must never change we must change the importance of proclaiming the gospel. It's through the gospel that God will save his people and bring them to

glory this is his plan. The second application is that we need to understand that most people will think that our message is strange and out of date and irrelevant.

People might laugh at us when we tell them the gospel but we must remember that the significance of the gospel is not discovered by human wisdom, it needs the work of the Holy Spirit to reveal this gospel to the hearts of sinners. So we must not lose heart and we must be convinced that the preaching and proclaiming of the gospel is God's method of reaching sinners so that they can be saved and brought to glory.

That has always been God's plan, which he decided in eternity and in time is bringing it to fruition through gospel proclamation. So even though times are hard and the gospel seems to be so irrelevant to so many we must continue to share it and proclaim it whenever the opportunity arises for it is God's method of saving sinners and bringing them to glory.

But the people of Paul's day did not understand the gospel they rejected gospel wisdom for their own man made wisdom. We know this because the crucifixion is clear proof that they did not have God's wisdom (v 8); for had they understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory. Sadly neither the leaders of the Jews to whom the gospel was a stumbling block nor the leaders of the Gentiles to whom it was foolishness understood God's divine wisdom.

In their willing ignorance they executed the Son of God for in their eyes Jesus was anything but glorious yet in God's eyes Jesus is the very Lord of Glory. Human wisdom cannot see the glory of Christ such wisdom simply sees him as an enemy of wisdom, yet he is wisdom personified.

But this should not surprise us for gospel wisdom is not humanly discovered; this is why Paul quotes from Isaiah 64:4. Paul's point is that the natural eyes, ears and hearts of men cannot know or comprehend God's wisdom. Such wisdom is prepared only for those who love him.

Human wisdom or human means cannot discover God. God's truth is not discovered through rational thinking or through observance of what we can see and hear but it must be divinely revealed. Human wisdom and human means will always turn a person against God's truth; ultimately human wisdom leads men to crucify Christ. However those who have come to love God have had this truth revealed which leads me to my next point.

2. TRUE WISDOM IS DIVINELY REVEALED (vs. 10-16)

Man cannot discover the truth of the gospel on his own, for God's wisdom cannot be discovered using man's wisdom. However what mankind cannot do God does by revealing his wisdom to sinners by His Spirit (v 10). The Holy Spirit reveals God to us in three ways,

a) By Revelation (vs. 10-11) – The Holy Spirit is God's agent for transmitting his truth and for communicating His truth. The first step of this transmission of God's truth is revelation. As a member of the Godhead the Holy Spirit knows the mind of God perfectly. God did not entrust the revelation of His word to angels but God used the Holy Spirit to reveal his truth to the Apostles who recorded it for us (v 10).

The Holy Spirit is the divine author of God's word. Although many human agents were used to write down God's truth, the message given to them was God's message and the Holy Spirit moved upon the human agents to write down the exact words that God wanted them to write (2 Peter 1:21). Now to highlight the Holy Spirit's unique qualification for revealing God's truth to us, Paul compares the Spirit's knowledge of God's mind to a human being's knowledge of his own mind.

No other person can know us as well as we know ourselves. Not even our husbands or wives who know us better than anyone else can know us more intimately than we know ourselves. Only we

know our innermost thoughts and the deep recesses of our own hearts and minds. Now in a similar way, only God's own Spirit can know Him intimately and this is the very One that has been sent to reveal God's wisdom to us.

The Holy Spirit knows the depths and thoughts of God because he is God, he is the third person of the trinity and he has revealed God's wisdom, God's truth to those of us who believe. Yes he has given his word to us in written form but he has done much more than that for he has revealed it to us personally by His Spirit which brings me to the next way God reveals his wisdom to us.

b) By Inspiration (vs. 12-13) – God's truth cannot be discovered through the wisdom of men but it can be received from God. However in order to receive God's truth it had to be offered first of all and Paul says that God's truth could be received because it was freely offered or given (v 12). God's truth was given to Paul not by the spirit of the world in other words not by human wisdom but by the Spirit who is from God that is the Holy Spirit.

Now Paul's 'we' here (v 12) is not referring to Christians in general but to himself and his fellow apostles to whom God's truth was originally given. God's word is for all believers but it was revealed first of all to the Apostles and the other writers of Scripture. Only of these men could rightfully be said that they were inspired. But we need to be careful when we use that word inspired. What do we mean by it?

Paul and the other writers did not record for us their own ideas and thoughts and some how the Holy Spirit gave life to the words nor did they give to us their own interpretation. No! They recorded what they received from the Lord and only what they received from the Lord. Although the Spirit used human authors and used the words that human writers knew and used, he selected them and arranged them in precisely the order he wanted them so that we can say that these are the very words that God wanted to be written. We are told that all Scripture is God breathed or inspired (2 Timothy 3:16) and that is because God has freely given his word to his Apostles through the work of His Holy Spirit.

But you might rightfully ask what does this have to do with us, for the Apostles are long dead. Well the Apostles recorded God's word for us and Paul calls this process of recording God's word as "expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (v 13). Another way of saying that is to say that the New Testament consists of spiritual truths placed in spiritual words.

Do you realise what is in your bible? It is nothing less than the finished product of the Spirit of God revealing to us the truth of God. When we read God's word or hear it proclaimed or preached we should be seeking the help of the Holy Spirit to open up to us the deep things of God. We need to realise that the bible is the mind of Christ revealed to us; therefore we are blessed people to have the word of God and our attitude to it must show that appreciation.

It is this word of God that the Holy Spirit uses to introduce us to Christ for faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17). Think about your own life. How did you learn about sin or about salvation or about heaven and hell? You were taught these great truths from the word of God. The cross and its meaning were explained to us from the word of God. Therefore we must appreciate what a treasure we have we must read it and get to know it for this is God's truth and we must use it to tell others about the deep things of God.

c) By Illumination (vs. 14-16) – The third step in the Spirit's transmission of God's wisdom is that of illumination. You see it is possible to read the bible even from many different versions and yet not understand it in a saving way. The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees of Jesus day were highly trained in the Old Testament yet they missed its core and central message of salvation.

They completely failed to recognise the promised Messiah when he came and lived among them (John 5:37-39). They did not believe Jesus because they did not truly believe Moses the great lawgiver in whom they placed their hope (John 5:45-47). They did not accept the things of the Spirit of God because those things seemed to be foolishness to them. Because they did not belong to God they could not understand spiritual things because such spiritual truths are spiritually discerned (v 14).

Those teachers of the law and those Pharisees are like everyone else who rejects God and his truth they live without the Spirit; therefore they have no desire to understand the spiritual nature of God's word. People without the Holy Spirit cannot know or understand the things of the Spirit because such truths are spiritually discerned but those with the Spirit have been given the help that they need to grasp God's truth, God's word and to see it's clear message.

The man without the Spirit is spiritually dead they cannot see it or understand it yes they can read God's word but they cannot comprehend its message in any saving way. But those who have the Spirit are made alive spiritually and therefore are able to read, understand and embrace God's truth for themselves.

This is why we need to pray for ourselves and for others. We need to pray that God will open our eyes and the spiritual eyes of others to see the wonderful truth in God's word (Psalm 119:18). No one can understand the word of God simply by reading it alone we all need the help of the Holy Spirit to illuminate its pages so that we can see the deep things of God.

As we read God's word every day we ought to start by asking for the help of the Holy Spirit to open our eyes and heart not just to accept God's truth but also to obey it in our lives. We ought to be praying for the preaching of God's word that God may help each preacher to understand God's truth and then that he will grant them the ability to communicate God's word to his people.

We ought to pray for every congregation that God may grant his Spirit to each person so that they will see God's truth and obey it with the help of the Holy Spirit. Most of all we should pray for sinners that God would open their blind eyes by his Spirit so that they will see their need of salvation and turn to Christ in repentance and faith. But they will not do that unless God sends His Holy Spirit to them and opens his truth to them.

Therefore pray towards this end for each person that you know that is outside of Christ and in need of salvation.

However for those of us who have the Spirit then we are able to make judgements about all things (v 15). The all things is a comprehensive word we are able to see and understand spiritual truth and also appreciate that men and women without the Holy Spirit are in a desperate state before God. We are also able to view all that goes on in our world from a godly perspective we are able to see the world through God's eyes.

On the other hand the world does not understand Christians (v 15). It is just as hard for them to understand believers as it is for them to understand his word. The world tries to make judgements about Christians but their judgements are always wrong. They may accurately evaluate our faults and shortcomings and may even be able to see areas in our lives that are inconsistent with our faith but the world can never understand or evaluate our faith.

If the gospel is a stumbling block to them or if it is foolishness to them so then is our faith in Jesus Christ. Christians will always be misunderstood and sadly mistreated because that is what happened to our Master. We will always be laughed at, mocked and even in some places of the world killed for our faith. The reason for this persecution is simple the world does not understand faith for they do not possess the Holy Spirit.

Paul gives a reason why no unbeliever is able to make a correct assessment of the Christian faith (v 16). Who knows the mind of the Lord? Certainly not the unbelieving world with their worldly wisdom for they do not possess the Spirit of God. This is why unbelievers who might want to discuss our faith with us will always contradict God's word with their arguments. They do not think God's thoughts therefore they can only think like an unbeliever thinks.

Ultimately unbelievers who might want to disagree and even argue with us about our faith are not really disagreeing with us but with the Lord. Unbelievers are actually seeking to instruct the Lord by their arguments and views but how can a creature instruct their Creator? It is simply foolish but that is exactly what unbelievers are they are foolish people because they refuse to accept God's truth and refuse to turn to Him for salvation.

However for those of us who are Christians we have the Holy Spirit therefore we seek instruction from the Lord, we seek the help of the Holy Spirit to teach us spiritual truth from his word and therefore we have the mind of Christ. The Holy Spirit reveals Christ to us therefore the Christian does not see things from a worldly viewpoint but he sees things from the viewpoint of Christ.

He does not see the world and all that happens in it through the eyes of earthly wisdom but the Christian see this world through the eyes of heavenly wisdom through the eyes of Christ who is the Wisdom of God.

Amen

1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-9

INTRODUCTION

From chapter 1:18 to 2:5 Paul has been comparing worldly wisdom with God's wisdom. Last time we looked at why people cannot accept God's wisdom. It is because such wisdom is spiritually perceived. (2:6-16). But even when our eyes have been opened it is so easy to be influenced by the worldly wisdom that is promoted all around us.

Such worldly wisdom when accepted and applied in the church causes divisions, which is exactly what, was happening in the church at Corinth. Now Paul turns his attention to the divisions in the church and he tells us about the cause, the symptoms and the cure for such divisions.

1. THE CAUSE OF DIVISION (vs. 1-3)

The reason there was division in the church at Corinth was not just because of the influence that pagan Corinth had on the church but it had more to do with the inward spiritual condition of the people. Yes the church had succumbed to the pressures of the world but they were also succumbing to their own sinful nature, which was making them worldly Christians.

But before Paul rebukes and corrects the church for their immature sinfulness he reminds them again that he is speaking to them as brothers' (v 1) he is speaking to them as a fellow believer. The use of 'brothers' is a term of recognition and of love. It reminded the Corinthian Christians that although there is much in their lives that the Lord and indeed Paul did not approve of nevertheless they are still Christian believers.

Therefore Paul loves them with a Christian love. Paul did not try to diminish the seriousness of their sins but he wants them to realise that in spite of their sin they are still his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and are therefore dear to him and to all other believers. He wants them to realise that he is rebuking them because he is their brother and therefore loves them in Christ rather than being a judge to them.

There is an important lesson here in passing. Every Christian fails to live up to their name. Some seem to fail more often and some are more careless and apathetic but we must never be tempted to think of them or of ourselves as anything else other than Christian people. We might sin frequently and seem to stumble from one sin to another but if we have experienced God's grace in our lives then we are our brothers and sisters and that is how we are to treat them.

However we must also note that true brothers and sisters will gently and graciously seek to rebuke one another for their sins not as a judge but as a brother.

As Paul thinks about the Corinthians he could not refer to them as spiritual people, yes they had embraced faith in Christ but it seems that they have gone no farther. Many of these Corinthians would have been Christians for quite a few years now but yet they were acting as if they had just come to faith in Christ for they were mere infants in Christ.

When Paul uses the word 'spiritual' here he does not mean that they are not Christians but that they are not living up to their Christian profession they are not acting as mature Christian people but as little baby Christians. The word that is translated as 'worldly' is literally the fleshly ones. In this context the word is referring to the sinful nature of the Corinthian Christians.

When one becomes a Christian our sinful nature is not eradicated, it can no longer dominate, control or destroy us but it can and does still influence us and the more we give into it then the more influence it will have in our lives. When we give in to it and sin then in a practical way we are

being unspiritual for we are doing what those who are unspiritual do that is those who do not possess the Holy Spirit.

We are of course spiritual for we possess the Spirit but practically we are unspiritual doing on the practical level what unbelievers do. It is this giving in to their sinful nature that made these Corinthians infants in Christ rather than mature believers. They are still in Christ united to Him by faith, but they are not growing, as they should because they are giving in too often to their sinful nature.

We need to heed Paul's rebuke here. Perhaps for at least some of us we have been Christians for many years and yet if we are honest with ourselves we are still living like baby Christians. We have sat under the preaching of God's word for many years but we never seem to act upon it. Far too often we have good intentions when we leave here on a Sunday but those intentions soon vanish when it comes to Monday morning.

What is it that causes this to happen why is it that we do not grow, as we should as Christian people? Here lies the reason or at least part of the reason. We are far too worldly we give in to our sinful nature too easily and therefore we live like our unbelieving neighbours and friends. We are still Christians we are united to Christ by faith but we simply are not growing, as we should because we give in to our sinful nature and indulge it far too often.

We should never condone our sin, we should never excuse our sin but we should always deal with it and ask God by his grace to give us a godly determination not to give in to our own sinful nature. Of course the key to this is daily obedience to the Lord. It means taking God's word seriously so that we are not just hearers of the word of God but are doers of his word.

The more we actively obey God's word then the more we will find ourselves resisting our sinful nature. The truth is the more we submit ourselves to the Lord and to his authority in our lives then the less we will sin and consequently the more we will grow in grace.

When Paul first preached at Corinth he taught them the basic truths of the gospel and of the Christian faith. What Paul calls the milk (v 2)? But now probably about five years later they still needed to be fed the milk of the word when they should be on solid food. Like many Christians in our own day the Corinthians seemed quite content to stay on the milk the basics of the Christian faith.

There are some Christians who don't want their Pastor or preacher to be too deep when preaching the things of God. They like to hear again and again the basic Christian truths but they don't want to have to think and explore those truths further. There is no difference at all between the milk and solid food in content except that the solid food will be more detailed and has more depth to it.

All God's truth is milk and solid food at the same time. When someone first becomes a Christian they will understand the basic elements of the gospel they might only know they are sinners and Christ died for them. That is true and that is the basic teaching of the bible.

However as they grow in their Christian thinking they will develop and begin to explore what it means to be a sinner further and what Christ dying for them really means. So they will begin to learn more about the greatness, majesty and holiness of God that makes sin so offensive.

They will begin to learn about Christ taking the wrath of God upon himself and that this was God's plan from eternity etc. The basic truths are still there but the growing Christian is beginning to move from the spiritual milk to the solid food of God's word. Solid food does not mean that we are constantly learning new truth and new doctrines. No it's just that we are learning more about those doctrines and truths.

I wonder if we were to do a spiritual health check what would we find. Are we still on spiritual milk or are we longing for more solid food. As a preacher and Pastor I am responsible before God for giving you both. But you as members of this church and as a congregation are responsible for using the God ordained disciplines, so that you will grow in grace.

There is nothing as sad as seeing a Christian who has been saved for years and yet they still have very limited knowledge of the great truths of the Scriptures. It is sad to see a Christian who should be mature in the faith yet he or she is immature in the way that they act and live out their faith.

If you fit into this category then the reason Paul gives is that you are still worldly you are giving into your own inward sinful nature rather than submitting yourself to the authority of God's word. You are doing your own thing too often instead of obeying the word of God and this was causing division in Corinth.

2. THE SYMPTOMS OF DIVISION (vs. 3-4)

Immature Christians who are still on the basic Christian food instead of the solid food that they ought to be on will express their immaturity in the life of the church. They give in easily to their sinful desires and therefore their actions display their immaturity. It was seen in Corinth through the jealousy and quarrelling that existed and went on within the church.

Jealousy is an attitude and quarrelling is an action that results from that attitude. Both attitude and action displays selfishness, because it's all about having my way. These two sins are representative of many more that arise within churches when there are far too many immature Christians especially as those who are immature should really be mature and godly people.

Selfishness is seen in many ways in churches but it will eventually destroy a church if left unchecked. It will corrupt morals, weaken personal relationships and ultimately it produces doubt about God and his word. Unless it is dealt with within our own hearts first and foremost and then in the life of the church as it raises its head in many different ways and in many different forms.

But let us just think about the two symptoms as it affected the church at Corinth. Jealousy and quarrelling caused division within the church at Corinth and it is inherently seen in immature children. You see it in young toddlers who cry when they are not getting the attention and someone else is receiving it. You see it in the playground of school where one envies another because they have a new toy or new shoes etc.

When jealousy is displayed in the church then it is because of immaturity you are still on milk when you should be on solid food spiritually speaking. Another person gets attention in the church and you resent it because you want that attention. Someone else is given a task to do that you want to do.

Someone else is given praise and you resent it because you want to be at the centre of it all. Such attitudes are a sign of immaturity and it needs to be rooted out of our lives by submitting to the word of God.

Likewise quarrelling is often caused by immature people within churches. These are people who will only co-operate with those that they agree with or personally get along with or feel some affinity with. Therefore quarrels develop sometimes over the most unimportant things or sometimes over people as at Corinth. In Corinth loyalties developed around individuals.

Some factions were loyal to Paul and saw him as their leader; others were loyal to Apollos and thought him the better leader. The truth is that neither Paul nor Apollos encouraged or desired

such loyalty and in fact would have condemned it but nevertheless it developed as a result of worldly and immature Christians within the church.

It's easy in churches to favour one leader or one Christian over others. It might be that your personality seems to gel with a particular leader or Christian in the church whereas it seems to rub others up the wrong way. It might be that one Christian thinks similarly to you in some matter that concerns you but other Christians do not see it your way.

Quarrels can so easily arise but the real spiritual reason why they arise in churches is because of immaturity. It is because some Christians who should have grown to be mature Christians are still acting like little children.

Such Christians are giving in to their sinful desires and nature rather than submitting to the word of the living God. If there are any such people here today then you must repent of these sins and seek under God to learn more about the basic truths that you love and seek to obey God's word by putting it into practise in every area of your life.

Paul says that when there is jealousy and quarrels in the church then Christians are living like unbelievers rather than Christ loving people (v 4).

3. THE CURE FOR DIVISION (vs. 5-9)

The cure for the division in any church is to turn away from self and set our eyes on God. When our attention is drawn to and focused upon the Lord then there will be no time or desire for division. When our attention is on Him it cannot be on others or self. Paul reminds the church that he and Apollos were merely servants whom the Lord used to bring the Corinthians to faith in Christ (v 5). They were nothing more than instruments used by God; they were not the source of the salvation of the Corinthians. So how can the church have favourites Paul and Apollos are on equal terms both were servants used by God to bring salvation and growth to the people of Corinth?

That is true in every church. Sometimes if God has used a particular person to bring you to salvation we can have a loyalty to that person that is above our loyalty to the Lord. But we must always remember that each one of us are only servants of the Lord, we might have been privileged to have been used by God in building his church but we are at best servants.

We all have our own God appointed tasks to do. Paul planted the seed of God's word Apollos had watered it, they had been faithful in doing what they were asked to do but the important thing is that only God made his seed grow (v 7). Paul never saved anyone from their sin. Apollos never forgave anyone their sin or died for anyone but God has saved the Corinthian believers by forgiving them through the death of his Son on their behalf.

At the end of the day the one who plants or the one who waters is nothing, because without God who alone brings growth the planting and the watering would come to nothing. You see why divisions occur in the church; because we promote self. The cure is to see ourselves as unimportant just servants doing what God has called us to do.

Therefore the real cure is to focus on the Lord who brings growth. The church should not be full of self important people but it should be full of servants doing their bit for the Lord and having their eyes firmly fixed upon Him who alone can bring growth. Now in this church like every other church we all have different tasks to perform.

But in carrying out those tasks we must always view ourselves as only servants of the living God and realise that our task would accomplish nothing unless God himself brought growth into our

church. The only one who is important in this church is the Lord Jesus. If you see yourself as important, as a key person in this church then you need to learn that you are a servant.

On the other hand if you think yourself to be useless and insignificant then remember you are a servant of the living God, an instrument that he uses for his purposes and for his glory.

The practical consequence of this truth is that we are all serving God with one purpose (v 8). Ultimately our purpose is to bring glory to God. We might all have different tasks just as planting and watering are different but both those tasks are serving one purpose, which is growth. This also teaches us that we need each other. Seed planted would come to nothing unless it is watered and seed cannot be watered unless it is planted.

Now we need to constantly remind ourselves that we need each other. We cannot function; as a church without one another, none of us is more important than others we each have a task to perform for our Lord. Therefore we must value one another, encourage one another and support one another and ultimately help one another to keep our eyes focused on the Lord who alone is important because He alone can bring growth.

When we have a true understanding of ourselves and of our fellow Christians and of the Lord then division will not be possible within God's church.

But even if our service for the Lord is not appreciated by our fellow Christians or even if we don't feel valued by them remember that the Lord appreciates and values our work and rewards us accordingly (v 8). Even if in this world we receive no reward although serving the Lord is a rewarding work then one day when we reach our heavenly home our work will not go unrewarded.

We don't do it for rewards for if we do; our work is not being done with the right attitude but the Lord never forgets our labour for him and will reward all accordingly (Revelation 11:18). The Lord's reward is not based on results or success but according to our labour. A missionary may spend 40 years labouring for the Lord and see only a handful of people saved while another missionary may see hundreds coming to the Lord in only a few years.

The reward of those missionaries is not dependant on their apparent success or failure but on the basis of their faithful labour for the Lord. I am so glad of that for it frees us from thinking of Christian work and ministry only in terms of results. We all long for growth, we long for the gospel to take root and grow in the hearts of those in this area.

But ultimately we will not be rewarded according to how many people were added to God's church here. No we will be rewarded on the basis of our faithful labour for our master.

At the end of the day we are all God's fellow workers (v 9), we work and trust God to work through us. He ultimately does His work we are his labourers. It was God's church at Corinth not Paul's or Apollos or anybody else's.

Likewise this church is not the Pastor's or Elders church or anybody else's church. It is God's church. He uses his instruments to plant and water the seed of his word but only God brings the growth. We must labour together in planting and watering as God enables us but ultimately we must rely and plead with God that he will bring growth in his church and in our lives.

Amen

1 CORINTHIANS 3:10-15

INTRODUCTION

This section of Paul's letter is linked with the previous passage by the idea of the believer's reward. Paul said in verse 8 that each person will be rewarded according to their labour for the Lord. He is highlighting the fact that each believer has a task to perform and that contributes to the whole work of God, as we work together God's purpose is being fulfilled.

However no one misses out just because their task does not seem as important as others. Each man and woman is rewarded not according to his or her task but according to his or her labour for the Lord for we are all God's fellow workers.

Now the fact that God rewards his people for their labour ought to be one of the greatest motivating factors in the lives of his people. Our ultimate motivating factor is the glory of God but we must not forget that our work is seen by the Lord and therefore we ought to give our best to him knowing that ultimately God rewards his people for their labour and those rewards will glorify God ultimately.

Paul uses the picture of building here to teach some important lessons about doing God's work.

1. AN EXPERT BUILDER MUST LAY THE FOUNDATION (v 10-11)

When Paul arrived in Corinth there was no church so Paul was designated the task by God to lay the foundation and he was to do so carefully like an expert builder laying the foundation for a building. The word translated 'expert builder' is one word in Greek and it is the term from which we get our word architect but the word in Paul's day meant not just designer but also builder.

Paul was an apostle and therefore as an apostle Paul was to lay the foundation for the church. He was to plant churches and instruct them in the great truths of the Scriptures and then he was to appoint elders who carried on the building process. But Paul is not boasting here for he clearly tells us that he is only able to lay the foundation because of the grace given to him by God to fulfil such a task.

The fact that Paul was an expert builder was not because of Paul's great skills as an apostle it was simply because God enabled him by his grace to do so. As Paul entered Corinth he had no ability to cause anyone to listen to him or to turn from their sin to faith in Christ. God alone had the power to do so but God enabled Paul to preach the gospel effectively and he enabled sinners to turn to Him. If any preacher sees people coming to Christ if any church is planted, it is because of God and his power and grace and not because of the preacher. Remember what we said last time that we are only instruments in God's hands.

However in the 18 months that Paul ministered in Corinth (Acts 18:11) Paul had faithfully preached the gospel and instructed the converts in the things of God. He had proven himself to be an expert builder. The idea behind the word expert is that of being wise. Again Paul is thinking about God's wisdom rather than the false wisdom that was loved in Corinth. Paul had built with great spiritual wisdom and with great skill.

He had a plan for building the church at Corinth; he went to the synagogue first (Acts 18:1-4). He knew that being a Jew, the people would give him a hearing and if God in his grace converted some then they could help him to reach the Gentiles of the town. So Paul was wise not only in his message, which we will see, was the wisdom of God but also he was wise in the way he went about his task. You see every expert builder has a plan, a strategy for laying the foundations of a building and he will carry that plan through so that the foundation is laid correctly.

Now there is a great lesson here for churches today. God wants us to be his instruments in building his church but we must be wise in how we do it. We must think clearly about the best biblical strategy for reaching people in our community. We want to lay the foundation carefully in people's lives by instructing them on the core truths of the bible. But we also want to build upon that foundation and we need to be wise in how we do it.

We don't want to compromise the truth of the gospel but we need to think carefully about how best to reach our community with the gospel and how best to instruct new converts in the basic truths of the gospel. There is no excuse in churches for lack of planning and lack of preparation; we must think and apply our thinking into our evangelism so that we are seeking under God to reach the people with the gospel in our locality.

We must use methods that are God honouring but also effective in reaching people. There are lots of churches who are God honouring in that they declare clearly the gospel. But I feel sometimes that they fall down in the way that they seek to reach people with that gospel. The methods used in evangelism must enhance the gospel not hinder it, but it also must be an effective method.

There is no point in being a gospel preaching church if we are not reaching people with the gospel because the methods we use are off putting for people. We all must be expert builders, wise builders as God enables us by his grace.

But if we are going to be expert builders then we need to be clear what this foundation that Paul laid was. Paul did not design the foundation he was God's instrument to lay the foundation, which is Jesus Christ (v 11). Paul's task was to present Christ to the Corinthians to instruct them about his person and his work and to urge them to trust in Him. His preaching and teaching were to be Christ centred and every doctrine that he presented was to be focused upon Christ.

Christ is the foundation of our Church for no one can become a Christian unless they come to Christ. No one can be a member of his church unless they know who Christ is and what Christ has done for them. Christ is the foundation that we build upon in this church. He is the One that we present to people and we call people to repent and place their faith in him. He is the One that we build upon and therefore all that we do and think and say must be Christ centred. We are not presenting the gospel unless we present Christ to people; the foundation will never be laid in their lives unless Christ is preached to them and unless they come to embrace him.

There are religious organisations that try to build their church through a moral and ethical code or through traditions of a church or through some other means. But those foundations will not stand the test of time the church is to present Christ as the one to whom sinners must come to for salvation.

Now Paul knew that as an apostle he was to lay the foundation and once that had been laid he was to move on and lay the foundation somewhere else. He knew that others would build upon the foundation, which was laid. That is why Paul and the apostles appointed elders in the church they were to continue building upon what was laid.

Now as with any building the foundation is the most important part, you cannot build until and unless the foundation has been laid. But the foundation is not the whole building you must build upon it so that the building can be completed. Paul knew that other people were building on the foundation that he laid in Corinth. However he was concerned that the builders should be very careful how they build. It's no good having a good and solid foundation if the rest of the building work is shabby and of inferior quality.

Now this is a warning to us all but in particular to those of us who teach and preach. We must make sure that what we teach is true, accurate and biblical otherwise we could be making the building of God's church unstable. This is why being an Elder in God's church carries an awesome responsibility this is why those who teach are judged more strictly (James 3:1). We must build up the lives of God's people and that means building with God's truth.

This is why incorrect doctrine is ultimately harmful to God's church, preachers must be loving enough to expose error and to show graciously how such error will harm God's church, God's building. But ultimately we are all builders for our lives and our words teach others in the church all the time. If we are careless about the things of God then that is teaching others that such things are not all that important.

If we are inconsistent in our lifestyle then that is teaching others that it does not matter if you do not practise what you know to be true. We must all ask ourselves what am I teaching others in this church by my words beliefs and lifestyle? I trust that each one of us will be careful how we build so that we will not make God's building unstable.

2. THE MATERIALS TO BE USED IN THE BUILDING WORK (v 12)

No Christian needs to worry about the foundation of their faith for that foundation is the Lord Jesus; it is secure stable and perfect. However every Christian ought to be concerned with the materials we use to build upon this foundation of Jesus Christ. There is only one foundation but there are many types of materials for erecting the spiritual building.

We all are constantly building upon our foundation; we are all building some sort of life or some sort of church. We might be building a beautiful structure with the best materials or some sort of hovel with the poorest materials we can use. We may intentionally be building or we may be building by neglect but we are all building something.

If you look at church history and look around today at those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and at the various churches then we will see that there are vast differences between professing Christians and churches. There are some who are glorifying God by their worship and lives and there are others who seem to stumble from one spiritual crisis to another and seem to really make little headway along the Christian pathway.

The materials listed in verse 12 are in two categories. The first category lists gold silver and costly stones. These materials clearly represent high quality materials. The second category wood hay and straw clearly represents inferior materials. But what does it all mean? Well it is all about building on the foundation of Jesus Christ. There are some Christians and churches who are doctrinally sound they understand and believe the great doctrines of the bible.

They also seek under God to apply those doctrines in their own lives and in the life of their church. They seek as a consequence to serve their Master wholeheartedly with love for Christ and others. They are diligent in using the means of grace to encourage and strengthen their faith in Christ and to build upon their foundation. They are faithful in their walk with God, they are careful in their study of God's word and they are busy using the gifts granted to them by the Lord. These types of Christians and churches are like gold silver and costly stones because they are building on the foundation of Christ using the very best materials. However there are sadly Christians and churches that are the very opposite.

They are confused doctrinally believing false doctrines and as a result they live inconsistent lives because they are applying wrong doctrines into their lives and their churches. They are less than wholehearted in their service for Christ and they say they love others but there is little evidence in

their lives. Such people are careless with the things of God being neglectful of the means of grace and failing to be diligent in the study of God's word and using the gifts granted to them.

I hope you can see that I have painted a picture of two extremes; some that are like gold silver and costly stones and some Christians and churches that are like wood hay and straw. But there are many Christians who are in between these two extremes We all need to ask God to show us which materials we are using I suspect there are times when we use them all. There are times when we are keen and on fire for God and are therefore diligent and faithful. But there are other times when we are spiritually cold and indifferent and are therefore careless about the materials that we use to build on our great foundation.

Paul's point is that we are to build using the best materials and we are not to be content with inferior materials. This means that we must strive for sound doctrine; we must study God's work diligently and seek God's help to come to a clear understanding of Christian doctrine. There are sadly far too many Christians and churches that do not know what they believe and are content with that. They say "I am a practical Christian; I don't concern myself with doctrine too much". The truth is that you will never be a practical Christian unless you know what the bible says and what you ought to believe. Because what we believe affects the way we live and the way we conduct ourselves as a church. If we are to use the best materials for building upon our foundation of Jesus Christ then we must put into practise what we believe.

This is obvious but sometimes churches and Christians are sound doctrinally but they never seem to apply what they believe. They believe that the world is lost and needs to be saved but yet they do not evangelise or witness to the truth of the Bible. They believe that they should give as the Lord has blessed them yet they give so little of their time, gifts and finance to the Lord and his work through the church.

We all need to ask God to give us the grace and determination to use the best materials that are available to us, so that we will carefully build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ.

3. THE REASON WHY WE SHOULD USE THE BEST MATERIALS FOR BUILDING (vs. 13-15)

A new building is checked before it is occupied or used. We have building regulations that tell us that the building work must be done to a certain standard and with the right materials. Well in the spiritual realm it is just the same.

The Lord has building regulations, he expects us as Christians and as a church to build using the right materials, the best materials. Just as a building inspector will inspect a building before permission is given for it to be used so the Lord is the building inspector of his work. Paul tells us that He will inspect our building on the day when he returns as Judge. On that day every believer will be tested as to the quality of our building work. Fire is used here as a symbol of testing the standard of our building.

If we have built using wood hay and straw then it is clear that our building work is going to be exposed for what it is, shabby and careless. However if we have built using gold, silver and costly stones then our building work will be seen for what it is, something that endures and lasts.

The result of this testing by fire will be rewarded (v 14). If our building proves to be of sufficient quality as instructed by the Lord and therefore survives the Lord's testing then we will be rewarded accordingly. However those whose building turns out to be of inferior quality, whose building does not pass God's building regulation test then that person will suffer loss in some way.

Again we are not told what it means to suffer loss but it is clear that they will not receive the rewards that those who build with the right materials receive. We must be very clear however the

loss does not mean loss of salvation because salvation does not depend upon us or our building work but upon the Lord Jesus who is our foundation. Even if our building does not pass God's test the foundation of our lives, which is Jesus Christ and the salvation he grants remains steadfast.

Paul makes that clear here by saying that such people lose their rewards but they do not lose their salvation for they will be saved like 'one escaping through the flames.' The picture is of our wooden or hay or straw houses being on fire and although the house does not stand up to the test of fire we escape from the burning building unhurt.

So on that day of Judgement our shallow Christian lives and our shallow churches will be exposed for what they are. Our building will be shown up for what it is, it is not of good quality but we can praise God that our salvation is unaffected because Christ is our foundation.

Therefore the application is clear. Our motivation should be one of desiring that our building work will stand God's test. For that to happen we must use God's materials and use them with right motives. For it is easy to believe all the right things and even live the right way and yet have a heart that is not right because our motives are wrong. It is possible to think that we are using the right material and yet find that our building does not stand up because the right material was used with wrong motives and attitudes.

Ultimately God is the final judge of our lives and of our church but we ought to humbly ask God to reveal the nature of our building work to us. Then we need his grace to change what we need to change so that when his test of fire comes our quality of building will clearly survive and thus we will be rewarded accordingly.

However remember even if our building work turns out to be with the wrong materials, materials that do not survive God's test, let's remember that we will still be saved for our salvation does not depend on our building work but upon our foundation who is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen