

## GROUP BIBLE STUDY

The priority of any Bible study is to seek to understand what the Bible is saying to the people to whom it was first written as well as to understand it for our particular day and generation. So, the top priority is first to understand the text and then to make it meaningful and relevant. Here are some pointers to help you as you study the Bible:

### PRAY

Our preparation for any Bible study should begin and end with prayer. We need to ask God, through the help of the Holy Spirit, to guide us as we read the Bible and prepare for a study.

### ASK

In order to understand the Bible properly, we need to keep in mind six important questions:

1. **Who is speaking?** Everything in the Bible was written by men who were inspired by God. Though every writer of the Bible was inspired by God, sometimes the writers record words which come from the hearts of evil men. So, dealing with the question “Who is speaking?” will help us to know whether the words we are reading are words that we should obey today.
2. **Who is spoken to?** We need to realise that not every command that comes in the Bible is a command for us today. For example, the command by God to Noah to build an ark is obviously pertinent and relevant for Noah, but not for us.
3. **When is the Bible writer speaking?** In answering this question, we will need to make a distinction between those who are living under the law and those who live under the guidelines and principles as outlined to us in the New Testament, the way of Christ. Therefore, the principles we see

with regards to worship in the Old Testament have a relevance to us, but we need to read them in the light of the New Testament. It is always important to bear in mind that one part of the Bible can often help us to understand another part.

4. **What type of language is the writer using?** The languages used are usually one of two types: either literal or figurative. Sometimes both will be mixed together in one passage – for example, Jesus is spoken of as the Lamb of God, which is clearly a figurative form of speech. However, he is also described as the one who takes away the sin of the world, which is literally true for those who believe. So, Jesus was not an actual lamb, but he was the one who became the offering for our sins.

5. **What are the conditions or circumstances in which this writing is given?** If we can get to grips with the particular circumstances the writer is facing when he writes, it helps us to understand what he is saying.

6. **What is the context of the Bible passage?** Think about what has just been said and what is about to be said in the particular book of the Bible, as well as the context of the Bible passage within the whole of the Bible.

The Bible is indeed God’s inspired word – it is his revelation to all mankind. So, in order for us to understand the Bible we must seek to study it properly. Only then can we “*correctly handle the word of truth*”. And if we keep these six simple questions in mind as we prepare our study, we will find that we can indeed get to grips with God’s word.

## PLAN

For those who are preparing and leading a study, the following steps should prove helpful:

1. Try to break the passage into parts or sections so that you can clearly divide up the passage you are looking at.
2. Think about what you don't understand in the passage and therefore what others might not understand as well. What parts do you need to gain more background and information about? Be ready to deal with puzzles that people will ask you about. So, for example, when studying John 3, people might ask 'What is the kingdom of God?', 'What is a Pharisee?'. These are obvious things that people might need to have some more information about.
3. Having broken the passage up into sections, we then come to thinking about questions. You can use the questions that are in this book. However, you may want to write your own, which is of course perfectly all right. Questions can be one of three types.
  - A **Understanding.** The first type of question should be aimed at trying to draw out our understanding of what the passage is saying.
  - B **Significance.** Only once we have begun to understand the passage can we move on to questions that try to highlight the significance of the passage in the light of the particular book or letter, and of course against the backdrop of the whole Bible.
  - C **Application.** Then we move on to questions which apply to the situations we are facing today.

## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

- Do make use of clergy and commentaries and other Christians who have a maturity which you can rely upon when you are seeking to tackle Bible passages.
- It will sometimes prove helpful to have more than one translation as this will give you some fresh insights into the verses which you are focusing on.
- As we come to study the Bible we need to keep in mind that all the books of the Bible have one great theme: that is God's plan to save mankind from his sins through Jesus Christ.
- Fundamentally, make sure that whatever you do, you seek to do it to honour and glorify God.

Let us not forget::

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”  
2 Timothy 3:16-17.

## **Background to 1 Corinthians**

The ancient city of Corinth was located on the isthmus that controlled access to two seas, the Aegean (about 5 miles to the east) and the Ionian (on the west). The closeness of these two seas and the nearness of the city to Athens, which was only 45 miles away to the north-east, gave Corinth a position of strategic and commercial importance. If we were to walk the streets of Corinth in the days of the Apostle Paul, we would certainly consider it to be both prosperous and rich. Corinth was also of considerable size for, at the peak of its power, its population probably numbered over 200,000, as well as thousands upon thousands of slaves.

It would be fair to say that Corinth itself had something of a chequered history as it had been destroyed by the Romans, only then to be re-established by them in 46BC under Julius Caesar. It was then that Caesar populated this new city of Corinth with Roman war veterans and free-men.

It is reliably believed that Paul came to this important yet immoral city in the autumn of AD50. Just beforehand, he had been preaching the Gospel to the highly intellectual Athenians. Paul would now spend a year and a half ministering in Corinth (Acts 18:11) before the Jews brought him to the court of Gallio (v12). When Paul came first to Corinth, he worked as a tent maker, thus providing himself with the opportunity to preach and make the Gospel known (Acts 18:1-5). The church, like the city, was made up of both Jews and Greeks. What linked the church together was the fact that these people had come to know and trust Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. Yet they carried with them a considerable amount of baggage from their past.

It is believed that 1 Corinthians was part of considerable correspondence that took place between Paul and the church in Corinth. 1 Corinthians is believed to have been written during Paul's third missionary journey, from Ephesus probably in the spring of AD55 or 56. When we read through this first letter, which I warmly commend you to do, you will find it a valuable source of answers to a number of dilemmas and problems that the church faced, both in the 1st century and in the 21st century. After the introductory material, Paul begins to answer the theological and practical problems, which had been raised by the church and into which he had also been given insight by his many visitors.

In writing this letter Paul had a strong purpose to rectify certain serious doctrinal and moral sins, as well as trying to regulate the Christian living of those Corinthian believers. He also wanted to bring order out of disorder, which had been the mark of their worship. When we skim through the letter, we will see that they had a wrong view about the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the body (1 Corinthians 15). There were also other issues that were troubling them, such as incest, adultery and other sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 5). Paul also addressed the whole issue of the misuse of Christian liberty (chapters 8 and 10) as well as how to receive the Lord's supper (in chapter 11).

### **For further reading see:**

1. The Message of 1 Corinthians, Life in the Local Church by David Prior  
(IVP, Bible Speaks Today series)
2. Strengthening Christ's Church, the Message of 1 Corinthians  
(Welland Garden Series)
3. 1 Corinthians by Leon Morris  
(Tyndale New Testament Commentary series)  
*a little bit more technical but deals with particular verses in a helpful way*

### **Introduction to 1 Corinthians** ***People living in the World***

Corinth was one of the most important trading and commercial centres of the ancient world: much of the East and West traffic of the Mediterranean would pass through Corinth. When Paul arrived in the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, it certainly wasn't a place for the faint-hearted. It was a prosperous and cosmopolitan city. It not only thrived on the trade that passed through its gates, it also was a centre of the ancient world's vanity, well-known for prostitution, drunkenness and debauchery. It seemed a very unlikely place for God to wish to plant a church!

However, Corinth was also a strategic place for the mission of God's church into the Mediterranean world. Paul stayed longer there than in any other city except Ephesus. He visited Corinth on his second missionary tour to Europe about AD50. When he arrived, he stayed first of all with a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla, who had been expelled from Rome and may already have become Christians.

Paul had a unique relationship with this church. It seems that when he was expounding Scripture to them, his appeal drew in people from the lower sections of society. The Corinthian church had its fair share of problems and issues and it is likely that this letter came to them about 3-4 years after it had been established. It is not surprising that they had a few teething problems.

The opening chapters set out some key Christian principles. Then Paul addresses some practical issues: immorality (ch5); law cases between Christians (ch6); carelessness about the consciences of others (ch8); idolatry (ch10); and an improper way of behaving at the Lord's Supper (ch11).

The Corinthian church was far from ideal. It certainly didn't have the perfect Christian within its midst. On the whole, it was a rather mixed bunch, just as in Moulton and other churches up and down the land. The church didn't survive because they were better people. No, they thrived because they knew the Gospel. It was absolutely crucial for them to focus once more on the God who had called them into his Kingdom and to follow in the path that he was setting out before them. The Anglican Church too is facing uncharted waters this autumn. There are tensions both within the Church of England and within the wider Anglican Communion. If the church is to thrive and prosper, then it is important, even vital, that we build upon the foundation that is Jesus Christ. Quite simply, we should not forget that we are the people of God and therefore that we are to march to his drum beat and to listen to his word. We need to ensure that the church is in the world, as it obviously must be, but we must also ensure that the world is not in the church!

It is encouraging to know that God works even in the toughest of situations. The church of Corinth was born out of Paul's preaching and his friendship with Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:1-18). This letter was a response to the news Paul had received from them. They had written to him asking for his wisdom on a variety of matters. Clearly, they had problems, but remember that they had to contend with the Corinthian society which was going off the rails. This is certainly the experience of the church today. We are increasingly out of sync with our culture and, if the church is to remain faithful to God and to his word, we will find it increasingly challenging to live the Christian life in the world we live in and engage with today. However, we must rejoice in the fact that even in such an unpromising situation, God is able to build his church!

## **Study 1**

### **1 Corinthians 1:1-17**

#### **God's Church Divided**

Most people would say that we have come a long way in the last 2,000 years. We would say that we are superior in terms of our education and believe that we are more refined and sophisticated. It certainly would be true to say that we know more about the world that we live in and the universe around us. So, today's modern world has the help of 2,000 years of thinking, philosophy, scientific exploration and investigation. Without doubt our ability to access information from around the world is staggering. Yet in many ways we are actually no better off than the people who lived in the 1st century. We still have the same sorts of social issues and are still contending with the same temptations. Our human nature is really no different now from what it was then.

*"Paul, called to be an Apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the Church of God in Corinth".* The Apostle Paul begins this letter to the Corinthians in his usual manner, starting with his name, greeting his friends, giving thanks and praying for all his readers. He is also able to invest these words with a deeper and more important truth for us to see and understand. Right at the start of the letter, Paul emphasizes that he is the founder of the Corinthian church (Acts 18) but he is more than that. He is an Apostle and founder of the church (Ephesians 2:20). God's church, his people, is built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets. Because his authority has been challenged (1 Corinthians 1:12), Paul begins his letter by naming himself and identifying his position as an Apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul wants to make it clear that, as an Apostle, he has been called by God to this work. In v2 we see that the believers in Corinth are part of God's universal church as well. This

draws us to our own time and generation. The Corinthians are described as a people who have been set apart in a special position before God because of their spiritual link/union with Jesus Christ. V2 makes clear that they are called to be a holy people. In v3 we see its clear linkage not only with 2 Corinthians but also Galatians, Ephesians and Philemon, where Paul uses very similar greetings to his readers. He is reminding them that they have been given "*grace and peace . . . from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*". Paul wants to stress that this grace and peace comes from God. Thus he begins his letter to the Corinthians by linking them directly to the will and work of God.

In vv4-9, he gives thanks to God for the work that the Corinthians are doing on God's behalf. Paul realises that God has given them his grace through their union with Jesus Christ. He expresses the characteristics of God's church. He sees that these Corinthian believers are a work of grace. The church itself only came into existence because of the mercy and goodness of God as expressed in our Saviour, Jesus Christ. We recognise here that evidence of the Apostle's preaching was confirmed by the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing them to that place of repentance and faith. In vv7-8, Paul addresses himself to their needs, both for the present and future. We need to remind ourselves that the church of God is very much like a colony of heaven here on earth. We live as aliens and strangers in this world, longing to be with Christ and to see him face to face. We know that, as we live here, we live by different standards and are judged by different criteria. Our ultimate allegiance is to the Greater King. As Paul brings this section of thanksgiving to a close in v9, he wants to reassure his readers of God's faithfulness. It is because God has called them into fellowship with Jesus that we can be assured that he is faithful in completing the work that he has begun, for God is the one who will give them every grace and gift that

they need for living the Christian life. As we see here, we are able to observe the Apostle's five-fold repetition of the name of Jesus Christ in this brief section. All salvation, past present and future, is based on Christ's salvation and his work at the Cross, until he comes again.

It is important that this truth is deep within our hearts because at this time the question of the future of the Church of England is very much in our minds. A recurrent question is "What is the future for the church?" If we think of the church as being co-terminous with the Church of England, then we may well be in for a surprise. It is not certain that the Church of England will continue into the future. But if we mean by the church those people who have been called by Jesus Christ to be his body here on earth, the temple of the Holy Spirit, then we can be absolutely certain that there is nothing so secure. For God is building his church and the rest of history is merely there to adorn his work.

The foundation of the church, the origin, the character and the destiny of the church are all linked together in our Lord Jesus Christ and his work and ministry for us.

The Apostle Paul is thankful that God is at work in the church in Corinth. Yet this church faces problems (vv10-12). In this section of the chapter, vv10-17, we see the Apostle's appeal for unity. "*I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you*". In the light of the divisions that the church was facing, Paul encourages the Christians both positively and negatively. He begins by making an appeal for them to have a united testimony. Then he appeals to them to have a life of harmony in mind and confession of Jesus Christ. Paul makes these pleas is so that there may be no divisions within the life of God's church. These divisions are cracks

that convey dissensions, leaving the church fractured and ineffective in its witness. Paul had been told about these divisions by members of Chloe's house. Without doubt, these reports had alarmed him. It seemed that the Corinthian church was divided into at least four groups. Sadly, it is often the case that a local church can also find itself divided into factions. It seems that in Corinth, the four factions were centred around four significant leaders. First there were those who claimed to have a special link to Paul. Next there were those seeking to follow Apollos, well-known for his eloquent speaking. The third group wanted to be followers of Cephas (Peter) - no doubt this group were impressed by his apostolic emphasis on the Jews. The final group mentioned were the Christ Party - they probably were making the claim to have a unique and special relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul quickly seeks to burst the validity of such divisions. Christians are all one in Christ Jesus. Paul asks "*is Christ divided?*" He shows the stupidity of even raising such a question. This leads Paul to mention baptism and to say that the Corinthian believers had no reason to depend on the effectiveness of baptism by him as a sanctifying part of their salvation. Why? Well, because he had baptised so few. He concludes this section by reminding his readers that Jesus Christ did not send him to baptise, but to proclaim the Gospel. What was his approach? Not to use words of human wisdom, nor clever arguments. The heart of his message was of course the cross and he sought to explain its essential meaning to the Christian.

The challenge for us, facing a denomination that is increasingly showing signs of division is once more to seek to bring the church to a unity of sitting under Christ and his word. The unity of the church is to be based upon what God has said and what God has done.

In conclusion, this passage speaks of the great importance of the church. We have seen that, at the heart of the church, the foundation, is none other than Jesus Christ and the apostolic doctrine that the Apostles taught. The destiny of the church has also been revealed, that is made complete and perfect and joined to Christ. All this will come about through the unity of the Church, which is based upon apostolic truth. If today we are to confront the divisions that face the church, we must go back to the very basics of our faith, namely building upon the apostolic doctrine and seeking to be united in Christ.

### **Questions for Study1, 1 Corinthians 1:1-17**

- Q1. How does Paul describe himself (v1) and the church at Corinth (v2) and why is this important?
- Q2. Paul is seeking to deal with divisions in the life of the church at Corinth. What do we learn from his approach (vv1-9)?
- Q3. What does Paul thank God for (vv4-8)? Which of those blessings are enjoyed in our church?
- Q4. Read the following Bible passages: Jude 1:17-19, 1 Corinthians 3:3, 1 Timothy 5:13, Titus 1:11. In conjunction with this passage, tease out how divisions can happen and how they can be avoided.
- Q5. In chapters 7-16 Paul answers the Corinthians' questions. He takes a lot of time to deal with failures that have occurred in Corinth: congregational factions (1-4), immorality (5) and lawsuits among Christians (6). Why do you think he put these matters first?
- Q6. What parallels can be made between the culture of the first century and our contemporary society? Is the church today evidently different from the world system or is it in danger of becoming absorbed by it?

## Study 2

### 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

#### The Wisdom of God

There was a little child, proudly wearing a small silver cross on a chain around her neck and standing outside a church. A man who never came to church approached the small girl and said "my dear, don't you know that the cross Jesus died on wasn't beautiful like the one you are wearing? It was ugly, a wooden thing, a symbol of death!" to which the small child replied "Yes, I know. But they told me in Sunday School that whatever Jesus touches, he changes".

It is amazing to realise that the Gospel is true! One of the pieces of evidence to help us realise this is that it would never have been dreamt up by a human being! Who would have thought that the one to save us would die? Who would have thought that God would send his only son to die in our place on a cross? Now stop and think about how people who do not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour react to that message.

We saw from our first study that the key problem in the life of the Corinthian church was that they were proud not only of their own achievements but also that they were focusing on the importance of man. This is Paul's main issue in these opening chapters in this letter to the Corinthians.

It seems likely that Paul's teaching and his method were under fire in the first century as he tried to proclaim the Gospel in Corinth. Could it be that they wanted greater eloquence, greater intellect or greater philosophical content? Whatever they were searching for, they obviously thought that Paul lacked it. Here we are in the 21st century where once again preaching is under fire, often being said by the press and by those who come to church to be out of fashion. In this study, we will see that Paul focuses on

salvation found in Jesus Christ and not in the wisdom of men. We discover that Christ, the power and wisdom of God, is the source of man's salvation, so that we cannot brag about our own achievements.

This passage can be divided neatly into two sections. Look firstly at vv18-25. This section flows on logically from what Paul has been saying in v17, that Paul himself had not come preaching with human wisdom. The Apostle realised that his proclamation of the message of the cross would produce two results. The first result is that it would be seen as foolishness to those who are lost. The second result would show the power of God to those who are being saved (Romans 1:16). Paul is pointing us to the power of God in salvation and how that salvation is revealed in the cross. In v19 he introduces us to an Old Testament quotation from Isaiah 29 to show that God dismisses the wisdom of men as a means of salvation. How often in our own day and age do we find people believing that they can work out their own salvation by their own efforts and ingenuity?

In v20 Paul now asks a very important question: "Where is the wise man?" God has rejected the wisdom of men who are seeking to strive for salvation through their own intellect. It seems that the '*philosopher of this age*' was the person who was trying to solve every issue by his own ingenuity and reason. Paul goes on to explain in v21 that God, the all-wise, sought to show that men and women could not come to know him through their own wisdom. This does not deny that God has revealed something of his nature and character in the creation which he has given to us (Romans 1:18-20). Rather, what we do learn here is that it was God's purpose to save those who believed by what appeared to be foolishness in the world's sight, that is the process and work of the cross. We are clearly told by Paul that the Jews were seeking God through miraculous signs and the Greeks through wisdom but God was

revealing himself through the preaching and the proclamation of the cross. Both Jews and Greeks had sought to find answers to the questions about God and life either in a miracle or in the wisdom of their minds. Yet in Matthew 12:39 Jesus told the Jews that they would be given only the sign of Jonah which of course points to the death of a Messiah! In v23 Paul clearly shows that his task was to preach Christ crucified. What now becomes clear is that to the Jews, this message of the cross was a stumbling-block. To the non-Jewish world the message of the cross seemed foolishness. Yet we are assured in v24 that God is the one who chooses his people. The Apostle tells us that God has his chosen people, both Jews and Gentiles. The first section closes with Paul making the bold claim that even God's foolishness and weakness are vastly stronger and wider than the strength of humankind. For the God we worship is a God who will accomplish all that he purposes, and he is a God who is in control.

The second section, vv26-31, now takes us on to show us how God is calling his people to be his church. In Paul's mind, he is looking around the church at Corinth and he realises that not many of them were intellectual nor powerful nor from the higher echelons of society. Rather, what he saw was that God was choosing the weak and foolish to shame the wise and the strong. What does this demonstrate? Surely it demonstrates the grace of God as he showed mercy to the weak and foolish of this world. We discover in v28 that God chose those from the lower echelons in our society. Why was God working in this way? In v29, we see that God worked this way to show that no man might boast in God's presence. The work of salvation is God's from first to last. In the closing verses of this section, we discover that salvation is God's grace at work in those who do not deserve such love and that this is God's plan, which was being accomplished in Christ Jesus. This work of grace not only accomplishes our salvation but is

working also for our righteousness, our sanctification and our redemption. What has Paul said? Surely it is to remind us that our own salvation is never achieved through wisdom, strength or world position but rather we are rescued from God's anger only through God's wise plan and power demonstrated at the cross of Christ. We have learned that God designed the Gospel and he called the church in a way that would eliminate all human boasting. The direction and force of what Paul teaches us is that we need to build a church which is not man-centred but God-centred.

### **Questions for Study 2, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31**

- Q1. Doesn't the message of Christ's dying 2000 years ago for the sins of all humans from the beginning to the end of time sound a bit foolish today?
- Q2. What are the two responses to the message of the cross (v18)? Why is the message of the cross 'foolishness to those perishing'?
- Q3. Why is human wisdom so particularly dangerous (v20)? What is it that human wisdom fails to see in Christ (crucified)(v24)? What does this mean?
- Q4. Why does God purposely choose weak and foolish things in this world (v27-29)?
- Q5. On the basis of what Paul is teaching in this passage (v18-31), in what ways do we need to reshape our methods and message about sharing the Christian faith with others?

### **Study 3**

#### **1 Corinthians 2:1-16**

#### **The power of God**

This year, Wayne Rooney and Colleen got married in Italy. They probably had one of the biggest parties of the year to celebrate their wedding. The dress, the location, the food, the entertainment etc were the best that money could buy. The couple invited people from around the world: sporting celebrities and those from TV and stage. Only the rich, the famous, the important and significant people were there. When God sent out the invitations to come to the church, to come to God's great party, he invited people who would never make it onto the Society pages of the newspapers. God invited people who weren't the talk of the town. It would be like Wayne and Colleen inviting the homeless or the hoodies to their wedding celebration.

With debates raging within the life of the church not only about sexuality but also the nature of leadership within the church, it is important to realise that what is crucial to the life of the believer is the work and the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit of God that gives us the Word of God and the Word of God is understood because the Spirit of God illuminates that Word. The Christian message is not like any political commercial that we might see on the television. A Christian's faith is not shaped by powerful debate, attractive advertising or subtle political spin. Those things may work in the world and may stir our emotions but they will not convict people of their sin nor lead them to become like Christ. Only God's Spirit can do that.

Paul now returns to the manner of his preaching that he first mentioned back in 1:17. He tells us that, salvation is given not through human wisdom but only through the cross of Christ and reminds his readers, the Corinthians and us, of the need to be dependent on the Holy Spirit as he

simply preached Jesus Christ and his cross. At the start of chapter 2, Paul goes on to remind his readers of his visit to Corinth. On that very first trip, recorded for us in Acts 18:1-18, the Corinthians heard the message and believed. How? By the power of the Spirit of God at work within them. The Apostle remembers that he came with the primary role of centring his attention on the truth about Jesus Christ. He wanted them to focus their attention not only on the fact of the cross but also its meaning, which he unpacked for them. Paul reminds the Corinthians and us that Jesus died on the cross to save sinners. The cross itself means that we have an effective way to discover and find forgiveness for sins. Paul did not come in power and strength, but rather in weakness and fear (v3), not in his own strength but because of the work of the Spirit at work within him. This underlines the very message and preaching that he gave to the Corinthians when he first visited them to establish the Church. In v5, we see that the aim of Paul's teaching is that the Christian faith itself might not be superficial, drawn out of human wisdom, but a faith generated by the power of God.

The second section, vv6-9, focuses on the wisdom that Christ revealed by the power of the Spirit. Paul makes it crystal clear that his presentation of God's plan of salvation (v7) is a wisdom that will be understood by God's people. Paul is reminding us that the Gospel involves a higher wisdom, discernable only by those who are mature. The wisdom of which Paul is speaking does not come from this age and from this time. By v7 God's wisdom is contained in a mystery that is still not fully revealed but was planned by God before the beginning of the world. The plan came about in God's mind and was outlined in the Old Testament. This great plan has now been revealed in the New Testament and supremely in the life of Christ. The very fact that earthly rulers put Christ to death demonstrates that they did not understand God's ways or his mind, nor did

they know of his plan. As we look at the world today through the eyes of God's Word, do we not see again a great movement to seek to destroy and crush God's work and the power of God's people?

In vv10-16 the third section of our passage, we discover that the Holy Spirit is unveiling the wisdom of God. This section begins with the word '*but*'. Paul reminds his readers that he, along with the other Apostles, had been given spiritual wisdom and insight so as to be able both to proclaim the Gospel and to recognise that those who did not know Christ were unable to understand the Gospel. He goes on to remind us further that it is the Spirit who helps believers both to interpret Scripture and to apply it to their hearts. In v11 Paul states an obvious truth and, by so doing, is reminding us that spiritual wisdom, that is the truth about God, can only be understood through the work of God's Spirit. We then rightly draw the conclusion that the Holy Spirit can and does reveal God's wisdom and truth to us. As if to underline this, Paul reminds his readers that it is the Spirit of God that we have received and that, because we have received this Spirit, we can understand Paul's message about the cross. He goes on to remind his readers and our own generation that what he speaks, along with the other Apostles, are words which were taught by the Spirit himself, expressing spiritual truths in words.

The passage comes to a conclusion in vv15-16, where we are reminded that the person who is guided by the Spirit draws discerning conclusions about all things. This is a mark of our own spiritual maturity. As if to deal with a possible question that might arise, the Apostle also reminds us and teaches us that Christians are indeed to make judgements concerning the spiritual conditions and actions of others. Paul himself will do this later in the letter, in both chapters 5 and 12. A result of all this is that the Christian is not subject to man's judgement in spiritual things.

What are the consequences of this section? Surely it is that as Christians we are to be actively involved in the world. We are to have discernment and judgement about the major issues confronting our world today. We are to have a view on sexuality. We are to have a view about our environment and political life. Each one needs to be weighed by Scripture. As Christians we are to be salt and light to our world, not afraid to speak up nor make the Gospel plain once more in our culture. It is only then that we have a hope of seeing the tide of liberalism turned.

### **Questions for Study 3, 1 Corinthians 2:1-16**

- Q1. Why does Paul highlight in 2:1-5 that he did not speak to the Corinthians before with fluency or persuasiveness, but he came in weakness and apprehension? (Romans 1:16-17) What does this teach us about how we should share the message today?
- Q2. In v7, Paul speaks of 'God's secret wisdom' that has been hidden. What is this hidden secret? (1 Peter 1:10-12) And has God's secret wisdom now been revealed to everyone?
- Q3. What does Paul declare about wisdom from God (vv9-10a)? And what differences do you see between human wisdom and God's wisdom?
- Q4. How do Paul's comments (vv13-14) explain his message and its effects on those who hear it? What do we learn about wisdom (vv15-16)?
- Q5. In what areas do you think Christians compromise/change their message in order to appear more acceptable, relevant, or "wise"? So from your understanding of the passage, how do you think Paul would respond to the modern allegation that his message is outdated, irrelevant and fanciful?

## **Study 4**

### **1 Corinthians 3:1-17**

#### **The Children of God**

When most of us were small, we longed to grow up. I can remember always wanting to be older and bigger than I was. As a small child I longed to be a teenager like my brother Martin. That special time seemed to be always just out of reach! By the time I was 18, driving a car and at university, I wanted to be at work and making money. When children play, they nearly always want to be grown-ups, whether it is doctors and nurses, footballers, or mums and dads with dolls and teddy bears. In the same way there are many in church who desire to grow. They long for a deeper awareness of the Christian faith. They aspire for a staunch faith and to live a mature and meaningful life.

One of the key problems in the church at Corinth derived from a fundamental issue of being man-centred rather than being God-centred. This man-centred view of church life gave them a twisted view of Christian leadership. This already came to light in 1:12 where the symptoms are all too apparent, that leadership was out of focus. It seems that the church was playing one leader off against another and, in so doing, undermining Christian leadership. So, in chapter 3, Paul turns his attention to this critical issue for them as a church to confront. From these verses we will see that God's foremost interest is not with our service but with our character. What was critically wrong with the Corinthians was that they were worldly rather than truly spiritual.

In this letter Paul has already outlined two separate groups of people. He has spoken of the unspiritual person, who has not yet received the Spirit of God and who cannot, therefore, understand spiritual truth (2:14). The second group are the spiritual, or mature, Christians, who have the

mind of Christ and are able to understand spiritual truth (2:6). Paul now adds a third to these two groups: those who are worldly, and it is into this group that the Christians at Corinth fall. Unsurprisingly, Paul speaks to the Corinthians in this passage about a lack of spiritual discernment. This is seen in their misunderstanding of those who are fellow workers with them for God. In the second half of this passage, Paul attempts to correct their mis-understanding and show what it really means to be working faithfully with the Lord (vv10-17).

In v1 Paul calls the Corinthians '*brothers*'. He does this before reminding them of their lack of spiritual maturity. It seems that they were acting in such an immature way because they were motivated by the world's ideas and actions. This lack of maturity meant that they did not grow up in their faith. Surely it is tragic to see an adult behaving like a child. Paul develops this idea in v2. When he first came to Corinth, the Corinthians had been fed with spiritual milk (these were the elementary Christian teachings, the means of explaining the Gospel to them). At that stage, they were not able to be taught deeper Christian truths. So it is with children. They need to have milk before they can move onto solid food: their digestive systems are just not ready. In v3 we find that the Corinthians showed all the qualities and characteristics of those who were yet to find spiritual maturity. What were they showing? Jealousy and quarrelling, amongst other traits, which obviously showed their lack of maturity. Paul wanted them to see this for themselves. That is why the question is posed as it is in v3. This immaturity shows itself in a distorted view of God's work and is revealed by their particular desire to follow a leading Christian worker rather than seeking to commit themselves wholeheartedly to the Lord alone.

In v5 Paul answers the question "How should Paul and Apollos be viewed?" He and Apollos should be seen as servants, not as Christian workers to be idolised!

In v6 Paul states 'I planted the seed', 'Apollos watered it, but God made it grow'. Paul draws some obvious conclusions from these words:

1. We cannot produce spiritual results, only God can (v7).
2. God's servants are united in his work (v8).
3. Though we are united in the work, we will be rewarded according to our faithful labour (v8).

He concludes this section in v9, that the church is built by God because it is ultimately his work. Paul uses this illustration of the farmer because Corinth overlooked fields and vineyards growing in the valley below which would have reminded all his readers that all the work that comes from the farm ultimately comes from the hand of God.

In vv10-17 Paul discusses how God's servants can build the church of Christ. The foundation is laid down by the preaching of the cross of Christ (1:18). The Christian workers are to do their part and seek to build the church up by using the spiritual materials that are available through Christ. This will culminate in the return of Christ, when the workers will be rewarded for the good work done and those who have worked with poor materials or in an ineffective way will find that their work is destroyed. As this section closes, we are reminded that Christians are the temple of God and that no man should seek to destroy that temple.

In vv10-11 Paul reminds us that he has the skill of an expert builder because he has been given the grace of God. An expert builder will follow the plan that God himself has given and God has given us a plan to build his church.

'Jesus Christ and him crucified' is at the heart of what God is seeking to do. Every builder who works for God must be careful how he builds.

In vv12-15, Paul turns his attention to the kind of materials that Christian workers are using. As we have already seen in the letter, the key materials that should be used to build up believers are firstly the preaching of the cross, secondly salvation and all that it entails and, of course, the encouragement of believers to live the Christian life. This teaching is absolutely vital if we are to build up the life of God's people. For the kind of building material will stand and be judged by God using the test of fire on the Day of Judgement. This is the 'day of the Lord' referred to in 1 Thessalonians 5:2-9. This concerns the return of Christ. A person's work will now be seen by the quality of the material that has been used to build up God's people. This will focus on the teaching and the life of those leaders who have been working with God's people. We will recall that fire in the Bible is often used figuratively in one of two ways. Firstly, that of a purifier; secondly that which consumes. At once we see how right it is that this is used as a symbol to remind us of the judgement on the believer and the work that has been done. We are encouraged in this section by v14, that the work that stands the test of fire will be rewarded.

In vv16-17, Paul now turns to challenge the church, the spiritual temple of God. This draws to our minds considerable consequences about our own lives and actions; and the issues that the Church of England is facing, that how we live as Christians matters a great deal, not only to us and to the church but supremely to God.

Implicit within all this, we see that there is a clear warning against those false teachers who have come amongst the believers to mislead, seeking to destroy the truth of the

Gospel. Paul says that anyone who actually destroys or damages God's temple (v17) will themselves be destroyed by God. The reason is absolutely crystal clear, God's temple is holy! This is a very strong warning to every Christian minister and worker. It is also a warning to those who hold leadership within the life of our church, locally and nationally.

### **Questions for Study 4, 1 Corinthians 3:1-17**

- Q1. There were factions in the Corinthian church who thought they were more spiritual than others. How would they react to vv1-4? What does Paul mean by 'infants', 'milk', and 'solid food'?
- Q2. What is the relationship between God and those who teach and between God and those who are taught (vv5-9)? What is the foundation that Paul laid for the Corinthians (vv10-11)?
- Q3. What is 'the Day' (v13)? What does this Day hold for teachers in God's church (v8, 12-15)? Why is this principle important in our present times?
- Q4. Having already spoken to us about the importance of foundations (v11) Paul now goes on to talk about what we build upon those foundations. Why should the Corinthians be careful about what is built upon their foundation, Jesus Christ (vv16-17)?
- Q5. What do you say to people who have 'the mind of Christ' (2:15) yet behave in the same way as those in the Corinthian church? What lessons are there for the 21<sup>st</sup> century church to learn?

### **Study 5 1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5 Dependency on God**

It is helpful to realise that we can be so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use. It is also entirely possible to be so other-worldly that we actually make no difference to the world we live in, thus wasting our lives and not making a difference for Christ. It is also possible to think in heavenly ways so that our lives on earth will be lived with purpose, meaning and power. The key will be learning to be dependent on God.

One of the keys that we will learn from this passage is that we must not deceive ourselves about our true spiritual walk. It is all too easy for us as Christians to trust in our own wisdom and so disregard what the Bible is teaching (vv19-20). If we allow our minds to be moulded and shaped by what the Bible teaches, it will help us to avoid self-deception.

In this passage Paul returns to the subject of wisdom. He warns us not to deceive ourselves into thinking that the wisdom of this world will be sufficient for obtaining salvation or that the wisdom of this age will build up the church of God. We need to give up the world's wisdom and seek God's wisdom! In the opening verses of our study, Paul reminds us that we are to do what appears to be foolishness in this world, namely preaching the cross, which is God's wisdom for salvation (1:18-25). In v20, we learn that God can read us just as we can read a book. The wisdom of the wise in this world in God's sight is totally futile. We are not to put our trust in human wisdom because true blessings will flow from God and will be given to his church (vv21-22). All things belong to the Christian for all things actually belong to God and they belong to the Christian because of the work of Jesus Christ (v23). Paul

lists all the things that belong to the Corinthians. He does this to act as a cure for their boasting and to deliver them from a wrong way of thinking.

If the first section reminds us about our dependence on God, now we see that by being dependent on him we are in fact servants of Christ (vv1-5). The beginning of chapter 4 follows up the discussion that had taken place at the end of chapter 3. Now the focus becomes those who are God's servants, seeking to serve God's people. Those who are servants of Christ are also considered stewards of God's secret things (v1). These secrets indicate those mysteries of salvation that God is now revealing in his Word (1 Timothy 3:16). The cross, this great mystery that is now being revealed, has been entrusted to Christian workers to proclaim because they are servants of God. Because our servanthood derives from the servanthood of Christ, we have no right or authority over the truth that we proclaim, rather we are to proclaim it to God's people in the NAME of Jesus.

In v2 we go on to think about the character of these servants. Those who are handling God's truth must first of all show themselves to be faithful. In vv3-4 Paul expands on this and reminds us that, as the Lord's servants and stewards, we are to be judged by the Lord himself on the quality of the service that we have given. In v5 Paul once more points us to the return of Christ and how as Christians we will stand before his judgement seat. Paul charges the Corinthians not to judge his work or faithfulness; it will be the Lord himself who will *'expose the motives of men's hearts'* (v5). It will be the Lord who will bring to light what is hidden. Paul reminds us that the second coming (a much neglected doctrine) will be the time when we will receive our praise from the Lord. This underlines that a servant will receive the wages for the work that he has done (Matthew 25:14-23).

Just as Paul has warned the Corinthian Christians not to make too much of their leaders, in this passage he begins to explain how we should regard both Paul and Apollos. Undoubtedly this is a timely message for the church today as we look to our leaders both in Moulton and in the Diocese with Bishops Ian and Frank, and of course to the wider leadership in the Anglian Communion. We should listen carefully to what is being proclaimed. Is the focus on the cross, on the incarnation of Christ, on the need for salvation for all people? Or is it on the world's wisdom and on the traditions of our age?

### **Questions for Study 5 1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5**

- Q1 Why is wisdom so important to Paul as he presses home his teaching to the Corinthians?
- Q2. What deception does Paul see the Corinthian's have fallen into? Why is the wisdom of this world like false gold (vv18-19)? In vv18-21 how does this deception about wisdom relate to their boasting?
- Q3 What do we discover about God in vv18-23? Who do we as believers belong to and why is this important?
- Q4 How was Paul a servant of God's secret things v1? What are the secret things?
- Q5. How can we show that we are trustworthy today v2? Why is Paul not bothered about who judges his actions (vv3-4)?
- Q6. What do we learn about God as our judge from v5? How should we find this verse both challenging and reassuring in today's climate?

## **Study 6**

### **1 Corinthians 4:6-21**

#### **The Servants of God**

The great theologian Augustine was once asked what were the three most important Christian virtues? He thought and paused for a moment, and then he said "humility, humility and humility!"

Here we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If we were to look back over 2,000 years of church history, we would still say that this great virtue is in short supply. Even good people seem to have a hard time being humble. Stop and think about the last Christian testimony that you heard, or better still the last five Christian testimonies that you heard. Not many of them will have spoken about humility and being humble.

We come now to the last of our studies on this first letter to the Corinthian church. Paul addresses a number of specific concerns which faced them. One in particular is their lack of humility. That need is not just true for the body of the church but also true for the leaders who seek to lead and shape our church today. The situation in Corinth was very mixed up. If we were to cast our eyes onto subsequent chapters, we would see an immature and confused church. Time and again pride was a common attitude in the church. Divisions certainly existed amongst the people of Corinth. They had their own cliques and favourite preachers. From what we have learned so far, it seems that a fair number of the people in the church were resistant to the teaching and instruction that the Apostle Paul was seeking to give them.

In this section, vv6-13, Paul describes how the Corinthians differ from himself and Apollos. The Corinthians had claimed to be 'spiritual' and to be rich spiritually. Paul and Apollos were considered to be weak, they were despised

and persecuted. What Paul has been teaching to the Corinthians, he applied to himself and Apollos (v6). He sought to teach them by his own personal example because he himself was a minister and they were to look to him as an example of one who puts his teaching into practice. When he writes in v6 "*do not go beyond what is written*", he is advising the Corinthians not to go beyond what is written in the Old Testament. He does this for their good and for our good also. They need to realise, as do we, that we are not to go beyond the teaching of what the Bible expresses to us. If we do, then the result will be that we will become conceited and foolish. This has an obvious application to the church today, when we see that in the question of homosexuality the church is certainly going beyond the teaching in the Bible.

In Corinth, some Christians were evidently boasting of their particular gifts and talents. It seemed that some of them had high positions within the life of the church. They had forgotten that their gifts and high positions had come from God and they had no right to boast at all! Another lesson for the church to re-learn today.

In v8 Paul writes with irony to underline the fact that the Corinthians evidently thought that they were fully mature when, of course, they still had a long way to go. This continues into v9, where Paul explains that God has publicly displayed the Apostles as humble, despised men, worthy of death. This irony continues, with Paul contrasting the supposed rich experience and triumph of the Corinthians with the inexperience and foolishness for Christ's sake of the Apostles (vv9-13). The Corinthians seem to be at the front of the procession whereas the Apostles themselves are at the end with those who are condemned as prisoners. Weakness, dishonour, hunger, poverty, hardship and suffering, with many other pressures, are the badge of being a true minister of God's good news. We need to

recall and remember that a disciple is certainly not greater than his master. Paul sought to set the record straight in these verses. When Paul states that he and his fellow-workers have become the scum of the earth, he brings all his comments to a climax.

In the final section, vv14-21, Paul issues a challenge to the Corinthians to humble themselves spiritually. To this end, he plans to send Timothy to help them to understand his teaching and prepare the ground before he comes.

Paul has written about the suffering that came to him as an Apostle. Surely the hardest thing that he must have had to bear was to see the church that he had helped to plant and which was so precious to him going so badly astray. In vv14-17 he explains that his seemingly harsh words are written not to shame them but to warn them of the seriousness of their actions. Their pride was leading them astray. Paul admits that they have many guides and teachers, even guardians, but he denies that they have any true spiritual fathers to advise them. Paul sees himself as their father in Christ. As their spiritual father, he believes he has the right to guide and direct them. He wants to make a distinction between himself as their spiritual father and those leaders in Corinth who are their 'guides'. Since Paul could rightfully claim to be their spiritual father, he feels he can ask them to be imitators of him. This will be a recurring theme throughout his letters (Philippians 3:17; Galatians 4:12).

What do we learn? We learn that Paul sends Timothy to them to help them grow in their faith. Remember that Timothy also has been one of Paul's 'children' through the Gospel and is now in the service of Christ. Though Paul mentions Timothy, it is clear that he is not the messenger who brought this first letter to the Corinthian church.

Paul was no fleeting evangelist who shirked from giving the Corinthians on-going pastoral care so that they might grow up in their new life in Christ. Paul understood that the responsibility of evangelism includes follow-up to establish new believers in the Gospel. This is like a good father. Paul kept in touch with his 'children', and showed them his love. All this was bound up with much encouragement and with a person who sought to practise what he preached as a good example (v16). We find that, when Paul could not be with them in person, his care for them continued, in that he sent someone else to build them up and encourage them. He is still willing to discipline these 'children' that he loves.

As we turn to the final verses, we find that he had planned his own trip to Corinth. He addresses the Christians in the church who have acted in a way totally out of keeping with the Gospel that had so transformed their lives. Paul is not slow in condemning those who are false teachers and try to undermine his authority by saying that he was unstable and weak. They were also seeking to attack his message. Once again, this sounds very familiar to us as we look at those who are teaching within the life of our church both in this country and abroad. The whole question of sexuality is certainly one where the Apostle's teaching is always discounted or overruled by those who think they know better. Time and again we see an unwillingness in our nation to sit under the authority of the Apostle Paul's teaching.

Paul replies that he is willing to come without delay. Then he says that they will discover who has the real power to stand up against what he has said (v19): in a sense, what he is saying is that talk is cheap and what will really count is the power of seeing lives transformed by God's word.

We learn that Christian leadership demands obedience to God's revealed will (the Bible), not yielding to the pressures of those who sound impressive as teachers. This means that we need to have discernment as Christians and to be able to weigh and judge those who are seeking to lead us in our faith. Paul says that we need to look for spiritual power, not merely spiritual words. We need to see how lives are being transformed so as to become more like Christ.

In v20 Paul uses the phrase *'the kingdom of God'*. By using this, he wants to point us to God's dynamic rule in the life of the church and the believer. Christian leadership also involves gentleness and firmness in dealing with those who are part of God's people (v21).

From our studies in 1 Corinthians, we have learned that the church was so precious to Paul that he was prepared to face the possibility of further upset so as to ensure that they kept on track. I think that you and I might well be tempted to find excuses not to visit people and point them back to God's Word. Criticising others is always a difficult issue to handle. Perhaps a good rule of thumb might be to avoid doing it when it costs us nothing, but there are times when the most loving thing to do is to point people back to God's Word.

## Questions for Study 6 1 Corinthians 4:6-21

- Q1 Why was pride such a big issue for the Corinthians and what was Paul's response (v6)? How was their pride damaging their Christian faith (v6)? Who is the giver of gifts to the believer?
- Q2 In vv 8-13, what emotional and spiritual suffering is Paul facing and why is he so concerned for the spiritual health of the church? What do we learn about what a true servant of Christ looks like?
- Q3 What can we learn from Paul's treatment by the Corinthians? Why are the judgements of people concerning the value of Christian ministry of such little value?
- Q4 Why is the suffering of Apostles a spectacle to the world, angels and unbelievers but an encouragement to believers?
- Q5 How can we deepen our relationship with other Christians in the light of Paul's teaching and example here? In the light of the first four chapters of this letter what does it mean to have a spiritual father as Paul was for the Corinthians? What contributions has your "spiritual father" made to your life?