

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS - PART THREE

Paul was excited about the Corinthian church, not because of their performance but because of their potential with all of God's grace available to them, having Jesus Christ living in them. The first area of concern to which he wanted them to apply the grace of God was that of division among them. In the first four chapters he looked at reasons why Christians become divided. In chapter one he explored the first two reasons. If we follow men, even good men, instead of God Himself we will be split. If we look for wisdom without power, like the Greeks, or power without wisdom, like the Jews, we will be divided. The message of the cross brings together both wisdom and power, and so it unites rather than divides people.

In chapter two, Paul returned to the issue of wisdom and acknowledged how even wisdom can divide, if it is the wisdom of man. The Greek world of those days was divided between different philosophies which fiercely competed with each other. Paul had experienced the intellectual rivalries of Greece in his visit to Athens, the academic capital of the Mediterranean world of those days, just before his arrival in Corinth in Acts 18. He had seen at first hand the contradiction of philosophers claiming that the mind of man could answer all questions, while being deeply superstitious about all the gods, known and unknown, who just might control man's destiny.

The Jewish community were also bitterly divided over doctrine between Pharisees, Herodians, Essenes and Sadducees. The Christian church has likewise for nearly 2000 years fought over doctrine, each group believing they had all the answers and the others were wrong. Paul recognised that the answer to division over wisdom was not to shout louder, use longer words, titles or qualifications to win our point, but in simple humility present the crucified Christ.(2:1-5)

The wisdom which unites is not man's but God's. The cleverest people alive cannot understand the wisdom of God or they would never have crucified the Son of God.(2:6-8)

God's wisdom has to do with a secret, unknown even to clever people, of all that God has planned for those who trust Him, not just in heaven but right now. Paul paraphrased Isa.64:4 where Israel were reminded of how wise God had been in creation and in providing a way of salvation to utterly sinful, undeserving human beings, just clay pots in the hands of the Potter.(2:9)

There is only one way to discover God's wisdom and that is to let God's Spirit, who lives in us, teach it to us. God is the only one who understands His own thoughts and can therefore explain them to us.(2:10-13)

There are three kinds of people in the world; first there are natural men, men as they are by nature, who only have their own wisdom and to whom therefore the word of God makes no sense; secondly there are spiritual men, men who have the Holy Spirit in them, and so the mind of Christ which gives understanding of God's ways. The characteristics of His mind or attitude are explained in Philippians 2:3-8. We cannot expect to tell God what to do but He will tell us.(2:14-16)

The third kind of man will be described in chapter three.

In the third chapter Paul came to yet another reason for division among Christians and then went on to suggest a brilliantly simple answer, explained in several everyday illustrations.

3:1-3 Q.1 What two kinds of Christian are there? How can we tell the difference? What is the spiritual diet of each? What is the behaviour of each? What would be the cure for being the wrong kind?

3:4-5 Q.2 How does being a baby Christian affect our attitude to leaders? How then does being a baby Christian cause division in the church? Give modern day examples of how this happens? How do mature Christians regard leadership, whether their own or someone else's?(Lk.22:25-27)

3:6-9 Q.3 What further illustration did Paul use to describe the cure for baby Christians? What different picture does his illustration give of the roles of different leaders? How does seeing our work as leaders in the way Paul put it change our view of how important we are? Should a pastor talk about 'my church'?

3:10-15 Q.4 Paul now used a third illustration to describe the real nature of Christian leadership. What is it? How does this explain in yet another way the cure for baby Christians? What are the essential features of a Christian building? What should be the foundation? What does that mean? From what should the walls and roof be built? What are the pictures being used here?

3:10-15 Q.5 What is the fire? What day was Paul speaking of?(II Pet.3:10-12) Is this something we should fear as Christians? Does it mean we will lose our salvation if we are baby Christians still?

3:16-17 Q.6 What kind of building are we? Whose building is it and who lives there? Remembering that Paul was speaking to baby Christians, what reassurance are these two verses? On whom was he being so tough? What do spiritual Christians have that baby Christians lack?

3:18-23 Q.7 How did Paul draw all the problems of the first three chapters together in the last part of this one? What is the greatest obstacle to baby Christians growing up? How can we overcome it for ourselves and for others?