

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

Paul and Sosthenes must have been a great team with a special understanding of what God could do with unlikely material. Both had been persecutors of the church.(Acts 8 & 18) Both knew how merciful God is to the totally undeserving. They would have had a shared sense of excitement as to what God could do with such unpromising Christians as those in the Corinthian church.

The letter begins with Paul reminding the Corinthians of the calling of God, first to him to be an apostle, a special messenger of God,(1:1) then to his readers to be saints, special possessions of God,(1:2) and finally to every Christian to be a fellowship, a special relationship with God and each other. (1:9) We need simply to call back to Him in submission to His authority.(1:2) 'Grace' was the Greek greeting and 'peace' the Jewish one. Our relationship with the God who called us is totally on the basis of God's undeserved grace expressed in an inner peace because through the cross we are no longer at war with God.(1:3)

When we read the rest of the letter with at least one major problem in every chapter it is hard to imagine how Paul could give thanks when he remembered these Corinthians until we realise that he was not thanking God for their behaviour, but for the grace which was in them. This meant that they had everything they needed in terms of speech, knowledge, inner testimony to the truth, gifts and forgiveness.(1:4-8) It was the grace of Christ who was in them, not their current performance, which would be the secret of overcoming every problem about which he would shortly be writing. God was faithful even if they often were not.(1:9)

It was with a quiet sense of excitement then that Paul began to consider how God's grace could transform every aspect of this struggling church. The first 4 chapters of the book deal with the threats from division in the church. The same reasons for division continue today.

Word had reached Paul that the Corinthians were divided because they looked to men, even good men, as their leaders rather than to the Lord Himself.(1:10-12) He reminded them that there is only one church and one Saviour, and it certainly is not him, Peter or Apollos. Wisely Paul had avoided putting much emphasis on outward ceremonies like baptism which might have encouraged a cult around him. Our task is preaching the gospel, not recruiting for our particular organisation.(1:13-17)

The second major cause of division lies in the two extremes of expectation Christians have of their leaders. The Greeks of those days measured success in terms of intellectual cleverness, the Jews thought what mattered was the power to do the miraculous. The same two extremes cause division today. Some look for correct doctrine others look for dramatic signs. Both may easily have missed the point, the cross of Christ. The cross does not seem impressively clever to the academic but it is the wisest idea the universe has ever seen. By it God solved the problem of His justice and our sin. To the enemies of Christ who looked on, the cross looked like a demonstration of the weakness of Jesus. It was the most amazing miracle that history has ever recorded with the power to save us from inevitable judgement.(1:18-25)

So the answer to division is to preach Christ crucified, not ourselves as leaders. By doing so we are demonstrating to the intellectual that God is so much wiser than we are. At the same time we are showing the miracle seeker how the Lord is so much more powerful than we are. The only reason for boasting is in what Jesus has done on the cross, not in what we know or can do.(1:26-29) The only kind of wisdom worth having is experienced in Christ, possible because we are right with

Him, because we belong to Him, and because He redeemed us on the cross. Now that is something to be proud of!(1:30,31)

2:1-5 Q.1 We have already seen that the Corinthian Christians were divided over their insistence on looking for either wisdom or power in preachers. Realising this, how did Paul approach them when he first arrived in Corinth? Having come to Corinth from Athens, what would have been his natural temptation? How would his message have been especially effective in the Corinthian situation? What can we learn from his example as we relate to divisions in the church today?

2:6-8 Q.2 There is another sense in which our search for wisdom divides us. What is it? What are the characteristics of the wrong sort of wisdom? What was the worst example in history of wrong wisdom? What is the 'mystery' of which Paul spoke?(Rom.16:25; Col.1:27; I Tim:3:16)

2:9,10 Q.3 Paul was quoting from Isa.64:4. Was he talking about what it will be like in heaven? If not what was he describing? How can we have this kind of wisdom?(James 1:5)

2:11-13 Q.4 Who alone understands God's wisdom? How can we come to have such wisdom? What is the first essential step to understanding God's wisdom?

2:14-16 Q.5 What two kinds of people does Paul describe here? How can we recognise which kind we are? 'Appraisal' is 'judgement'. What does Paul say is the effect of being spiritual? How does this work out in real life? What does it mean to have the 'mind of Christ'?(Phil.2:5) In what ways do we commonly try to instruct the Lord? Why is it so futile?