
§1 Salutation (1 Cor. 1:1–3)

Letters in the Greco-Roman world had a fairly standard form. They would begin with a salutation, followed by a conventional thanksgiving (often in the form of a prosaic prayer). Next came the body of the letter, often followed by *parenesis* (concrete directions), and then the closing of the letter. The salutation itself normally contained three parts that first named the sender, then named the recipient, and finally offered a greeting.

A typical non-Christian letter from Paul's day might open as follows: "Gaius, to Quartus, greetings." The salutations in Paul's letters are rarely so concise. Rather, Paul modified the form of the salutation by expanding it and giving it a distinctively Christian cast. Even when Paul's salutation is brief, as it is in 1 Thessalonians, it has a clearly theological tone. The salutation here in 1 Corinthians is quite elaborate.

1:1 / Paul describes himself as one **called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God**. This designation emphasizes God's divine initiative in setting Paul about the work that he did in founding and forming churches in the first-century world. While Paul literally writes, "called apostle" (the NIV supplies the words "to be"), he does not merely wish to report a title he received from God. *Apostolos*, from the verb *apostellō* meaning "to send," describes Paul as "one who is sent," so while **apostle** could serve as a title, the word defined what Paul did as a result of God's call. Moreover, Paul informs the Corinthians that he was an apostle *of Christ Jesus*. This phrase concerning Paul's apostleship can only mean that he is one who is sent out in behalf of Christ. He is Christ's own agent; indeed, one might understand that Christ Jesus himself sent Paul. Thus, Paul is one sent under the authority of Christ. Paul reminds the Corinthians of his relationship to Christ Jesus because in the rest of this letter he will deal with them as the agent of Christ, as one authorized by Christ, whose authority is not his own, but Christ Jesus'

authority. Furthermore, Paul's being commissioned and going on behalf of Christ Jesus are **through the will of God**. He did not simply decide to be Christ's agent; God willed it and now Paul works under and with the authority of Christ Jesus. The result of God's acting in Paul's life was that Paul became active in the world.

Along with Paul, **Sosthenes** is named as the co-author of this letter. From the letters preserved from the Greco-Roman world, it does not appear that joint authorship was a normal procedure. Why Paul wrote this way is open to speculation, and perhaps the motives differed from one letter to another. In the other instances of co-authorship the persons named with Paul were known to the churches to which they were writing, and from Paul's use of "I" and "we" throughout the letters we see that he did not always understand his co-authors to play equally active roles in the composition of the letters. The inclusion of Sosthenes here is especially striking since this reference is the only mention of Sosthenes in this or any other Pauline letter. Nevertheless, Paul calls him "Sosthenes the brother." In other letters of Paul the designation "brother" identifies one of his fellow workers, and that may be the case here (see Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 1:1; 2:13; 8:18, 22; 12:18; Phil. 2:25; 1 Thess. 3:2; Phlm. 1, 7, 20; and Eph. 6:21; Col. 1:1; 4:7, 9). From Acts 18:17 we know that someone named Sosthenes was the ruler of the synagogue community in Corinth at the time when some members of the synagogue brought Paul before the tribunal of Gallio. The charge against Paul was not successful, and the Acts account reports that Sosthenes suffered a beating from his fellow Jews when their case failed. We do not know whether the Sosthenes of Acts and the Sosthenes named here are the same person. If the two references are to one person, we do not know how he became a Christian or how he came to work with Paul away from Corinth, but we would gain insight into Paul's possible motive for naming Sosthenes as the co-author of 1 Corinthians.

1:2 / Paul refers to the Corinthians in an elaborate and deliberate manner. He refers to them as a **church**. The Greek word *ekklēsia* can be translated "church," "congregation," or "assembly" and was used in different contexts. In secular Greco-Roman literature it named a political assembly, especially one brought together for decisive action. Yet the word had religious usage in Judaism that Paul would likely have known. The LXX

uses *ekklēsia* to render the Hebrew word *qahal* that both named the Israelites at points in their desert wanderings during the exodus and referred to their later assemblies at the temple for various kinds of worship. There is no reason or way to force a decision between the secular and religious uses of *ekklēsia* in order to understand how Paul and the Corinthians thought about the nature of the company of Christians in Corinth. More crucial for understanding Paul's vision of the church than isolating a particular background for the word *ekklēsia* is to notice that he calls the Corinthians the **church of God**. The church exists because of God's initiatives. Thus, Paul refers to the location of the congregation **in Corinth** only as a secondary identification, for primarily the Corinthian church belongs to God (6:19–20), not merely to a place.

Paul continues to clarify the true theological identity of the Corinthians by referring to them as **those sanctified in Christ Jesus**. "Those sanctified" translates a Greek word that comes from a verb (*hagiazō*) that means "to make holy." In mentioning the sanctified state of the Corinthians in this way, Paul recognizes that God's own past activity, not that of the Corinthians, forged out their new life in Christ. To be sanctified means to be made holy, to be set apart for special service to God. The Corinthians are to reflect God's own holiness in their devotion to God. The form of the word here literally means "having been sanctified" and implies a completed past action that may indicate the conversion of the Corinthians to Christian faith. Clearly they have their identity in Christ Jesus, and perhaps Paul even means to remind them that they are "in Christ" and no longer "of the world" (see 1:27–30).

As Paul was (literally) "called apostle," i.e., called to be one sent by God, so the Corinthians are (literally) "called holy ones," i.e., called to be holy. The word translated **holy** in the NIV is sometimes rendered "saints" in other translations, but today that term has taken on connotations that could be misleading for understanding Paul's remark. The same basic root in Greek lies behind both the word that was translated "those sanctified" and the word that is construed with **holy** in this verse. Paul is not, however, being redundant; rather, he is emphasizing that God's divine calling imparts an identity that gives a new, clear purpose to life. As Paul was called apostle to be sent by God, so the Corinthians were sanctified to be set apart for service to God. Although persons and tasks differ, there is always a missional dimension to Christian identity and existence.

Furthermore, Paul acknowledges that the Corinthians were sanctified and called to be holy **together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours**. By informing the Corinthians of their common bond with all others who affirm the lordship of Jesus Christ, Paul registers an identity that will prove to be a large part of the solution to the problematic situation that existed in Corinth. While Paul has not yet mentioned any of the difficulties that exist among the Corinthians, it becomes clear in the rest of the letter that some in Corinth were manifesting lifestyles that were inconsistent with the manner of life advocated by Paul and embraced by the members of other churches. Later Paul will chide the Corinthians for their inappropriate independence (14:36), and he will repeatedly confront their arrogant tendency to strike a novel path of life (4:6, 17; 5:1–2; 11:16; 14:33b; 15:1–2). Even as he opens this letter, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are not an unrestrained holy group that is detached from the larger community of Christian faith. Rather, they and all other Christians live in a dependent relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ that establishes a mutuality that transcends the worldly boundaries of human relations. Shared devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ, who through the calling of God has authority over the lives of all believers, focuses existence and draws Christians beyond themselves and their immediate congregation into a universal fellowship of faith.

1:3 / The standard word for hailing the recipient in the salutation of a Greco-Roman letter was “greetings!” The Greek verb *chairō*, meaning literally “to rejoice,” was used for this purpose. Paul’s letters make a slight modification that gives theological emphasis to the greeting. Rather than *chairō*, Paul writes *charis*, meaning grace; and to that greeting he adds the traditional Jewish greeting, “peace.” This combination of **grace and peace** occurs in every letter attributed to Paul in the New Testament (although the triad of “grace, mercy, and peace” forms the greetings in 1 and 2 Timothy). The word “grace” summarizes Paul’s understanding of God’s full generosity in dealing with humanity; indeed, grace is the way, the means, and even the presence and power of God at work in relation to humans (1:4; 3:10; above all, 15:10). The result of God’s gracious dealings with humanity is summarized by “peace,” which is far more than the mere absence of strife. Peace means wholeness and well-being; it

is the divine result of the divine gift of grace. Paul consistently couples grace and peace, because he understands that grace creates peace and peace comes about through grace.

Moreover, Paul's greeting recognizes the source of both grace and peace to be **God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. All that God does is through Jesus Christ. In turn, as Paul calls God our Father he preserves Jesus' own language for God and he fosters the understanding of and attitude toward God that Jesus taught to his initial disciples. The religious significance of calling God "Father" has nothing to do with the idea that God is male, which idea has fallen under much sharp criticism today. God is not male or female; but the cast of this address inspires one to relate to God in the best terms of the love that is experienced in a healthy family. Moreover, relating to God as loving heavenly parent inspires Christians to relate to one another as sympathetic members of the family of faith. Indeed, because he regards God as Father, Paul regards Sosthenes as his "brother" and still other believers as his "brothers and sisters."

Paul ends this salutation with the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, we see Paul's overriding christological outlook from the beginning to the end of the opening three verses of this letter. Paul designated himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus. He recognized the church of God in Corinth to be those sanctified in Christ Jesus along with everyone else who called on Jesus Christ as Lord. Finally, Paul understood that the very grace and peace of God came to Christians from both God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Additional Notes §1

1:1 / Frequently in the seven undisputed epistles (Rom., 1 Cor., 2 Cor., Gal., Phil., 1 Thess., and Phlm.), Paul names a colleague as co-author of the letter; all of these writings except Rom. and Gal. refer to co-authors. Those named as co-authors with Paul include Sosthenes (1 Cor.), Timothy (2 Cor., Phil., 1 Thess., Phlm.), and Silvanus (1 Thess.). In the six epistles that are disputed (Eph., Col., 2 Thess., 1 Tim., 2 Tim., and Titus), Col. and 2 Thess. mention co-authors: Timothy (Col., 2 Thess.) and Silvanus (2 Thess.).

J. Murphy-O'Connor ("Co-Authorship in the Corinthian Correspondence," *RB* 100 [1993], pp. 562-79) studies the role of the co-authors with Paul and recognizes different levels of involvement from

one letter to another and even from one section of a letter to another section of the same letter. He argues that Sosthenes made more of a contribution to the composition of 1 Corinthians than past scholarship has suggested.

1:2 / Two grammatical issues mark the phrases **together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours**. First, the statement could belong with either (1) Paul and Sosthenes, or (2) **the church of God in Corinth**, or (3) those **called to be holy**. Thus, the line could mean (1) that Paul and Sosthenes envision the church universal joining them as they write the Corinthians—a thought that makes little sense; or (2) that the church in Corinth is being addressed along with the church universal—a striking image that locates the Corinthians as part of the whole church; or (3) that the Corinthians are called to be God’s holy ones along with the rest of the church universal—a sensible idea. Similar statements in 2 Cor. 1:1 and Phil. 1:1 strengthen the case for (2), despite the idea in (3) being easier to comprehend. Nevertheless, the fact that both (2) and (3) associate the Corinthians with all other Christians may mean that it is unnecessary to decide between these options; indeed, Paul and Sosthenes may have shades of both thoughts in mind, so that the ambiguity is deliberate.

The second grammatical issue is that scholars suggest that the phrase “those . . . who call on the name of our Lord” is a confessional statement from the life of the early church and that it is related to a range of texts and images in the OT. When Paul uses the phrase in the opening of 1 Corinthians he seems to be emphasizing the church universal—a church that is unified by the devotion of all its believers to the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the phrase implies that factions are to be condemned and that unity is the solution to the situation in Corinth. The significance of common calling on the name of the Lord for Christian unity was explicated by O. Cullmann (“All Who Call on the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” *JES* 1 [1964], pp. 1–21).

1:3 / C. K. Barrett (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1968], p. 34) notes that the combination of “grace and peace” also occurs in 2 *Bar.* 78.2 and 2 *Macc.* 1:1. Thus, these theological terms are found in close association in these two other writings from Hellenistic Judaism.

§2 *Thanksgiving (1 Cor. 1:4–9)*

The second typical normal element of a Greco-Roman letter—after the salutation—is a statement of thanksgiving or a thanksgiving prayer. Usually the lines mean little more than “I hope all is well with you,” although the writer typically makes some reference to “the gods.” Paul again follows the basic pattern of the standard letter of his day, but he modifies the form so that it becomes “Christian” and takes on a dynamic function in the letter. Scholars have long recognized that as a formal element of Paul’s letters the thanksgiving (or thanksgiving prayer) serves several purposes. First, the thanksgiving terminates the opening portion of the letter. Second, it signals the basic theme or themes of the letter that will follow. Third, the thanksgiving can sometimes even outline the major topics to be treated in the epistle. In 1:4–9, Paul acknowledges God’s grace as active among the Corinthians to the end that they are in every way enriched in Christ Jesus, in speech and knowledge of every kind. Among the Corinthians the real gifts of speech and knowledge are at the heart of their problematic thoughts and actions. At once Paul names the genuine strengths and weaknesses of the Corinthian church. The members experience the endowments of grace, but as the remainder of the letter reveals, their concern with and use of these gifts is completely out of hand.

1:4 / Paul reports his giving thanks to God at the outset of this section. He reiterates such thanksgiving later in the letter at 14:18. Paul does not mention prayer per se at this point, but the fact that his thanksgiving is directed to God indicates that he has prayerful activity in mind. The word **always** in this report emphasizes Paul’s regularity and constancy in remembering and rejoicing over the Corinthians. Paul’s thankfulness, however, is not primarily because of the Corinthians themselves, but rather because of the grace of God that affects the lives of the Corinthians. God as the source of grace and the giver of grace is the object

of Paul's thanksgiving. **Grace** itself in this statement is the experience of salvation, but not merely as the moment of initial faith. Rather, the following comments show that for Paul grace is the ongoing experience of God's endowing the Corinthians with spiritual gifts that redefine their lives.

Paul's references to grace make it clear that the Corinthians experience grace as a gift from God. Grace is given by God; there is no foundation for boasting (a major concern of the rest of the letter) in the Corinthians' experience of grace. The grace the Corinthians have, the gifts that are manifested among them, are God's and not their capacities and achievements (cf. 4:7–8). Moreover, Paul locates the experience of God's grace specifically in relation to Christ Jesus. In the context of Christian faith and life the Corinthians are the recipients of God's gift of grace, so that the grace is never purely at their disposal. Grace comes in a context and for a purpose, as Paul makes plain throughout the entire letter. God's endowments are for specific reasons in the context of the Christians' relationship to Christ and his community of faith.

1:5 / Paul explicates his thanksgiving further by specifying the reason for his gratitude: that in Christ Jesus the Corinthians are **enriched in every way**. The enrichment, said to be complete, is still not the property or privilege of the Corinthians; it is theirs specifically in the context of Christ Jesus, that is, in the context of the new life God created by working through him. In particular, Paul says the Corinthians have been enriched in all speaking and all knowledge. In the context of this letter **all your speaking** probably means the more specific phenomenon of spiritual assertions, not merely all the talking that they do. The mention of **all your knowledge** most likely indicates the Corinthians' perception of the truth of divine revelation, not merely a set of facts. Paul thinks here of both speaking and knowledge as phenomena of grace, i.e., as divine gifts. Remarkably, as one sees in the rest of the letter, the Corinthians' practice of making spiritual assertions (6:12–13; 10:23; 12:3; 14:1–40) and their concern with spiritual knowledge or wisdom (1:19–31; 8:1–2, 7–13; 13:2, 8) are serious problems in the life of the church. Thus, interpreters often suggest that here in the thanksgiving Paul is using sarcasm or irony. Yet such an interpretation fails to grasp the range of Paul's thought. Paul is a genuine charismatic who believes in, practices, and celebrates the reality of God's spiritual gifts. He

can easily distinguish between the use and the abuse of spiritual gifts. He offers thanks for the gracious gifts that the Corinthians received because they came to them from God. Paul emphasizes speaking and knowledge in his thanksgiving because, as major sections of the letter indicate, these gifts are prominent in the life of the Corinthian church. Later, Paul can take up the misuse of these endowments and express his unquestionable distress over the misappropriation of God's gifts. The gifts themselves, however, are real, and Paul rejoices over them because they are God's gifts—even in the face of their abuse. Paul's confidence lies with God, the giver of gifts; his *concern* lies with the Corinthians.

1:6 / Paul continues his thanksgiving with another word of explanation, although the rendering of the Greek word *kathōs* as **because** in the NIV (compare the translation in the NRSV, “just as”) gives the mistaken impression that Paul is adding a causal remark to what he has said. Rather, here he forms a comparison between the reality of God's endowing the Corinthians with spiritual gifts and God's initial act of grace in bring the Corinthians to faith in Christ. Thus, Paul refers literally to “the testimony of Christ” (NIV: **our testimony about Christ**) that he says was **confirmed in** the Corinthians. Paul rarely uses the word “testimony” in his letters, so the meaning of this word is not immediately apparent. He says the testimony of Christ was confirmed without stating explicitly who brought about the confirmation; the verb is in a passive construction that assumes God as the subject of the action. That God confirmed Christ's testimony most sensibly refers to God's establishment of faith in Christ in Corinth, so “the testimony of Christ” is another way of referring to *the gospel*. Paul's point here, then, is that God gives grace and enriches the Corinthians in the same way that God established faith in the gospel in the lives of the Corinthians.

1:7 / Paul continues the sentence he began in verse 4 with still another elaboration that serves to round out the idea of his thanksgiving. The phrase here begins with the Greek word *hōste*, which means “so that” or **therefore** and indicates that Paul means to explain the results of what he has been saying. Thus he says the Corinthians **do not lack any spiritual gift**, for as he has said, God enriched them “in every way” (1:5). Paul underscores the reality of the spiritual gifts in Corinth in recognition of the magnitude of God's grace. He continues, however, in a way that qualifies God's complete enrichment of the Corinthians by

saying that they experience these gifts (lit.) “as [they] eagerly await the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This crucial circumscription gives a clear eschatological cast to the spiritual gifts in Corinth. *Already* the Corinthians have faith in Christ, but *not yet* are their hopes in Christ realized. *Already* the Corinthians are enriched by God’s grace, but *not yet* has the full reality of divine grace been made real. Rather, Paul says the Corinthians **eagerly wait for [the] Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed**. Thus, Paul affirms the reality of the Corinthians’ experience of grace and the reality of God’s gifts to them, but he emphasizes that their involvement with grace is not as principal actors—they experience the reality of God’s grace, they do not initiate it. Moreover, even as they are enriched by God, they live in expectation, for they enthusiastically look forward to the “revelation” of Christ. Paul certainly means to refer to the return of Christ, but his use here of “revelation” (Gk. *apokalypsis*) rather than his more usual term “coming” (Gk. *parousia*) gives further emphasis to God’s priority in Christian life (cf. Gal. 1:15–17). Thus Paul says the Corinthians live their enriched lives looking forward to what God will do in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. God’s purposes and God’s future are greater than the present experience of God’s grace in Corinth, so Paul implies that the Corinthians should not be overly self-satisfied with the richness of God’s gifts to them. The Corinthians live in relation to a promise of the final revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ, so the full experience of God’s grace lies beyond the present in God’s future action, and the sole basis of the eager expectation of the Corinthians in God’s future, as Paul will declare, is that “God is faithful” (1:9).

1:8 / The final clause of Paul’s complex Greek sentence functions as a confessional statement. The grammar is ambiguous, however, and interpreters debate whether the remark in this clause is about the “Lord Jesus Christ,” who was named at the end of verse 7, or about God, who has been the unstated subject of a number of passive verbs throughout the preceding lines. The clause begins with a word that may be translated **he** or “who” (Gk. *hos*). The NIV translates the verb that follows this subject as “keep strong,” although it is the same verb that was translated “confirm” in verse 6. The passive form of the verb in verse 6 assumed God for a subject, thus God was the one who did the confirming, but Paul could have shifted his point of view so that now in verse 8 he has “the Lord Jesus Christ” in mind as the one

who sustains the Corinthians. Even if this is the case, he would still understand that God was the one who was acting in and through Christ in relation to the Corinthians. While the easiest way to read verse 8 would be to translate the subject as “who,” in reference to the immediately preceding Greek words “our Lord Jesus Christ,” the declaration that follows in verse 9, “God is faithful,” may be an indication of Paul’s intended subject in verse 8. The creation of a separate sentence that begins with “He” in the NIV and the NRSV accurately reflects the ambiguity of the Greek (the RSV reads “who” in reference to Christ and does not begin a new sentence at v. 8). Whether Paul means to speak here of God or of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Corinthians should gather that the basis of their security is not with themselves or their endowments, but with the divine action (of God or Christ) on their behalf.

Paul continues the eschatological emphasis that was registered in verse 7 as he speaks of the Corinthians’ being kept strong **to the end**. Here Paul has in mind the endpoint of time as we know it in our earthy existence. Paul thought and taught that he and the Corinthians (and all others) lived at the juncture of two ages (see the Introduction, p. 15, and 10:11)—“the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4) that had started to pass away with the cross of Christ (see 1 Cor. 7:31b) and the new age, the “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17) or “kingdom” (see 1 Cor. 15:24), that had begun but that would not be fully present until the coming of Christ (Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 4:13–18; 5:1–11; see 1 Cor. 15:23–24).

The outcome of the Corinthians’ being kept strong is that they would be **blameless on the day of [the] Lord Jesus Christ**. The language here is part of a legal metaphor that depicts being without guilt in relation to the law. The implication of this image is that the Day of the Lord would bring judgment at the end. The reference to the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ takes up language and thinking from the OT (Ezek. 30:3; Joel 2:31; Amos 5:18, 20; Zeph. 1:14–16), although in the OT texts the one who executes judgment on the Day of the Lord is *the Lord God*, whereas here Paul plainly understands that one to be *the Lord Jesus Christ*. Paul preserves the theological vision of the OT and gives it christological focus that makes the promise of the Day of the Lord all the more specific and real.

Finally, Paul’s unswerving confidence in the Corinthians’ future is remarkable, for from the remainder of the letter one sees that he faced grave problems in the life of the Corinthian

congregation. Yet Paul's remarks in this thanksgiving show that whatever confidence he had for the outcome of the problems in Corinth was based in God and God's working among the Corinthians through the Lord Jesus Christ, not in the Corinthians themselves. Indeed, Paul's declaration of confidence in God concerning the Corinthians should have directed the attention of the Corinthians toward God and away from themselves.

1:9 / All Paul's elaborate thinking and thanksgiving are epitomized in this crisp—but loaded—statement. Paul declares, above all, that **God . . . is faithful**. This truth is the foundation of Paul's confidence concerning the Corinthians. God's faithfulness is a major theme of the OT, where God is remembered and praised as a faithful God. Yet as we see in Paul's declaration here, he has in mind God's faithfulness as he and the Corinthians know it specifically through Jesus Christ. God had begun and was continuing a work among the Corinthians that had an assured outcome because of God's own character. The declaration of God's faithfulness will be repeated at 10:13, where Paul recognizes the reality of the temptation that the Corinthians must face and tells them that God's own faithfulness assures that they will not be tempted beyond what they can bear—indeed, God's faithfulness guarantees that “he will provide a way so that [they] can stand up under [temptation].” Already in 1 Thessalonians 5:24 Paul had written of God's faithfulness, coupling the idea with the memory of God's calling the Thessalonians to faith in a manner quite similar to his statement here. In 2 Corinthians 1:18 Paul again speaks of God's faithfulness—here in such a way as to reveal that Paul considered God's faithfulness beyond question.

God's faithfulness undergirds his calling the Corinthians, and as Paul explains, God's initiative in calling the Corinthians was related to a specific goal. Through God's call they were brought **into fellowship with . . . Jesus Christ**. Moreover, the Christocentric character of Christian fellowship creates a dynamic relationship between God and humanity, for on the one hand, Jesus Christ is God's Son, and on the other hand, he is the Lord of those God calls into fellowship with him. With this sketch of relations, Paul directs the attention of the Corinthians away from themselves toward their fellowship with Jesus Christ and through him to God. What God does for humanity, he does through Jesus Christ; and, at the same time, humanity relates to God in and through the divinely created fellowship with Jesus Christ.

Additional Notes §2

1:4 / The NIV reads, **I always thank God**, although the Gk. text of NA²⁷ reads, *eucharistō tō theō mou pantote*, literally “I give thanks to my God always.” The pronoun “my” is missing in two of the oldest and most reliable manuscripts (ⲛ* and B), but it is present in a wide variety of other texts, including some that are ancient and typically accurate. The easiest explanation for this discrepancy is that the pronoun was accidentally omitted in ⲛ* and B, for the variety of texts that do include this otherwise innocuous pronoun are striking.

The Greek phrase for giving thanks to God is a feature of several Pauline letters: Rom. 1:8; 14:6; 1 Cor. 1:4; 14:18; Phil. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2:13; Phlm. 4; and Col. 1:3; 3:17; 2 Thess. 2:13. On the significance of the thanksgivings in Paul’s letters, see P. Schubert, *Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings* (BZNTW 20; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1939); P. T. O’Brien, “Thanksgiving and the Gospel in Paul,” *NTS* 21 (1974), pp. 144–55 and idem, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul* (NovTSup 49; Leiden: Brill, 1977). These studies make clear the thorough and profoundly Christian character of this part of Paul’s writings.

1:5 / The NIV translation **in all your speaking** is far too broad to reflect Paul’s thought here. A reader can be easily and unfortunately misled by this rendering of Paul’s statement. Rather than having all speaking in Corinth in mind, Paul is concerned with God’s grace that manifests itself in inspired speech or spiritual utterance. In agreement see G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 39.

K. Grayston (“Not With a Rod,” *ExpT* 88 [1976], pp. 13–16) over-reads Paul’s phrases *en panti logō kai pasē gnōsei* when he asserts that they refer to divisions in the church between those advocating *logos* and those involved with *gnōsis*. Rather, in Paul’s discussion of the situation in Corinth (12:8; 14:6–25) the concerns with speaking and **knowledge** seem intimately connected.

1:7 / The subject of “spiritual gifts” that Paul raises already in the thanksgiving is a major topic of discussion in ch. 12 of the letter; and Paul mentions this matter in the course of his comments at both Rom. 12:6 and 1 Cor. 7:7. These gifts are clearly not thought to be birthright capacities; rather, they are divine endowments that come for the work of the Christian mission.

1:8 / While the NIV includes the phrase **our Lord Jesus Christ**, there is a division in the manuscript tradition between texts reading “our Lord Jesus” and “our Lord Jesus Christ.” Two ancient and authoritative witnesses, P⁴⁶ and B, omit “Christ”; while others (ⲛ A C D F G and many others, including ancient versions and Ambrosiaster) include “Christ.” Fee (*Epistle*, p. 35 n. 4) suggests that the absence of the title was

a very early accidental omission that resulted from the juxtaposition of abbreviations for the genitive forms of Jesus and Christ ($\overline{\text{IY}}$ and $\overline{\text{XY}}$).

1:9 / Paul says here (lit.), “God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with his son Jesus Christ our Lord.” The NIV obscures both Paul’s pattern of speech and the essence of his thought. The loss of precision in language is unfortunate, for Paul’s statement contains the unusual idea that God is the agent *through* whom the Corinthians were called. In every other instance that Paul uses the phrase “through whom” (Gk. *di’ hou*), he is referring to the Lord Jesus Christ as the one through whom God acts in relation to humanity—cf. Rom. 1:5; 5:2, 11; 1 Cor. 8:6; Gal. 6:14 (this last reference is ambiguous and may mean “through which” in reference to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ).

§3 *Factions in the Congregation (1 Cor. 1:10–17)*

This first major segment of the body of Paul's letter forms a coherent reflection on the specific situation in Corinth in relation to and in the light of basic matters of Christian belief. Paul examines and explains the character of the gospel itself, so that the Corinthians are directed to evaluate their situation in the light of the gospel of God's saving work in Jesus Christ and the implication of God's work for their lives. Paul argues against understanding the gospel as a kind of mysterious wisdom teaching, especially as a teaching that would elevate those who have certain information above others who do not. He reminds the Corinthians of their calling, of the message they heard and believed, of the way that God reveals truth to humanity, of God's certain judgment of their life in Christ, of the inappropriateness of spiritual boasting, and of the necessity of their taking stock of and then changing their behavior.

1:10 / Paul begins by making an appeal to the Corinthians. In Paul's direct address to the Corinthians the NRSV's translation, "brothers and sisters" is preferable to the NIV's **brothers**. The Greek word *adelphoi* is one of Paul's most familiar forms of address for Christians. He uses the word twenty times in 1 Corinthians alone as a way of speaking directly to the Corinthians. In Greek the male plural form of address was the standard form for addressing mixed assemblies of men and women (the same is true of Latin and other languages, including English in a former time). Paul repeatedly uses *adelphoi* as the form of address for the Corinthian congregation, even in instances in which he is clearly concerned to address the Corinthian women (esp. chs. 7, 11, 14). Thus *adelphoi*, despite its literal male cast, should be translated as the NRSV and other recent versions render it: "brothers and sisters."

When Paul says **I appeal to you**, the verb "to appeal" (Gk. *parakaleō*) could indicate either a formal petition as in a court of

law or a simple request that has no special urgency. The seriousness of the situation in Corinth and the way that Paul words the rest of this sentence show that he speaks urgently and in an official fashion. Paul specifies that he appeals to the Corinthians (lit.) “through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Translations that read “by the name . . .” are closer to the sense of Paul’s statement than the NIV’s **in the name . . .**, for Paul is continuing the christological emphasis that he registered in the salutation and thanksgiving and is now making it the basis and means of his appeal to the Corinthians. The substance of his appeal is given in the remainder of verse 10 in a series of three phrases that, by the form of Paul’s Greek, state not only *what* he appeals for, but even the *purpose* of his appeal. The phrases of the appeal are positive, then negative, and positive again. He urges that they all say the same thing (positive), and that there not be divisions among them (negative), but that they be perfectly united in the same mind and in the same conviction (positive).

The word **mind**, which Paul uses in the last phrase, usually has the sense of disposition or mentality; the word translated here as **thought** may be rendered “judgment,” “opinion,” “advice,” and “consent” (see 7:25, 40; 2 Cor. 8:10; Phlm. 14). In this christologically focused appeal for unity, Paul is making a plea similar to the well-known one he issued in Philippians 2:5. This call for unity aims at eliminating divisions that encumber the church and hinder its mission. Paul is not interested in imposing uniformity on the congregation, he is concerned that the community of Christian faith not suffer a tear in the fabric of its life that would weaken its faith and life in Christ. By choosing to make this statement his starting point in the body of the letter, Paul provides valuable insight into his primary purpose for writing to the Corinthians.

1:11 / Paul tells the Corinthians how he became aware of the problem he addresses: his information came as a report on the Corinthians from **Chloe’s household** or (lit.) “the ones of Chloe,” who apparently had witnessed the strained relations in Corinth. The statement here raises a series of issues that are impossible to answer with certainty. (1) We cannot tell whether Chloe herself is a Christian. (2) We cannot tell whether she and her household are from Corinth or Asia (perhaps Ephesus). (3) We cannot tell whether these people are member of Chloe’s family, her slaves, or freedmen in her employ. Since they know

the situation in the Corinthian church and bring the news to Paul in Ephesus, they are apparently themselves Christians. They are not to be confused with the Corinthians who came to Ephesus with a letter from the Corinthians to Paul (Stephanas, Fortunatas, and Achaicus—see 16:17). Identifying Chloe’s people precisely is not, fortunately, crucial for understanding Paul’s remarks to the Corinthians.

1:12 / Paul elaborates his concern by reporting that he has heard that some of the Corinthians are saying, “I am of . . .” and then naming either Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or Christ. The way Paul words his remarks is telling, for he says that “each” (NIV = **one**) of the Corinthians is making such declarations, so they are acting as individuals, not as groups; for each of them is speaking as “I,” not “we.” This shows us that, despite the suggestion of many scholars, there are not formal parties or fixed divisions in the church. Paul’s report does not create the image of clusters or clear factions that are set over against one another. Rather, we see a congregation in which its members are in general turmoil.

Moreover, the way Paul constructs this report also indicates that, incongruous as it is, Christ has been cast into the mix as one of a number of people with whom the individual Corinthians are claiming to identify (along with Paul, Apollos, and Cephas). Identifying oneself as being “of Christ” would normally have Paul’s approval, but the way he refers to the Corinthian situation indicates that perhaps in this case the claim to belong to Christ is not necessarily laudable. Exactly what the Corinthians think they are achieving by declaring such identities is not clear from Paul’s discussion at this point, but they apparently think such identities give them some kind of status. Yet what they are attempting to accomplish is uncertain. Their actions raise questions that cannot be answered conclusively: (1) How did this problem begin? (2) How did some in Corinth come to identify themselves with Cephas (Simon Peter)? Had he been to Corinth, or had they known him elsewhere and then moved to Corinth themselves? (3) How could Christ come to be one among several with whom the Corinthians identify? Would his name not naturally be more impressive than those of Paul, Apollos, and Cephas?

1:13 / The activity of the Corinthians in declaring these diverse identities causes Paul to compose a series of rhetorical

questions in this verse that aim at exposing the absurdity, the inappropriateness, and the danger of what they are doing. The grammatical construction of the questions signals that Paul expects the answers all to be “no.” Yet because of ambiguity in the vocabulary that Paul uses, interpreters debate exactly how the questions should be answered. The difficulty relates to the sense of the first question, **Is Christ divided?** If “Christ” in this question is a surrogate for “church,” then some argue the three questions in this verse are to be answered “yes—although to divide the church is erroneous and inappropriate,” “no—certainly Paul was not crucified for us,” and “no—of course we were not baptized into the name of Paul.” This would, however, be an unusual use of Christ by Paul—one that uses a very different meaning of Christ than that of verse 12. But then, what does Paul mean by asking “Is Christ divided?” In fact, the verb translated here as “divided” more normally means “to apportion out,” so Paul may be asking, “Is Christ apportioned out [as one option among several viable options]?” If this is the sense of Paul’s first question, then the answers to the three questions are “no,” “no,” “no.” In either case, in the sequence of these questions, the first identifies the problem and the following two questions make it obvious that the situation in Corinth is senseless. The third question, concerning baptism, will become Paul’s point of departure in the ensuing verses as he first argues that who baptizes whom is unimportant and second explains the central concern of his ministry—preaching the gospel in a way that does not draw attention to Paul’s ministry, but that ensures that the power of the cross is preserved and made effective.

1:14–16 / In an initial reading, Paul’s remarks in these verses appear to exhibit a surprisingly, even shockingly supercilious view of baptism. Paul is not, however, attempting to explain his theological understanding of baptism; rather, he is combating the Corinthians’ own obviously erroneous understanding of baptism as some kind of magical ritual (see 15:29 and the commentary on that part of the letter). Paul is grateful here that he baptized only a few persons in Corinth, for this means that not many will be apt to say they were baptized **into the name of Paul** (1:13) and then declare that they “follow Paul” (1:12).

As he registers this disclaimer, Paul recalls that he did baptize Crispus and Gaius. Crispus is surely the former president of the synagogue in Corinth who is mentioned in Acts 18:8, and the

Gaius referred to here may be the same Gaius mentioned in Romans 16:23 who, Paul says, hosted him and the whole church in Corinth. (Paul wrote to the Romans as he was in Corinth and about to go to Jerusalem with the collection he had assembled for the church there.) Thus, Paul's immediate memory is that he baptized only two prominent persons in Corinth—although he remembers (or someone like Sosthenes or Stephanas reminds him) that he also baptized the household of Stephanas. Later, at 16:15 Paul relates that Stephanas and his household were among the first converts in Achaia. The subsequent reference to Stephanas in 16:17 as one of the letter delegation may name the same person, although that is not certain since the name was not uncommon. There is certainly sarcasm in these lines as Paul attempts to jolt the Corinthians out of their boastful comparisons concerning their status in the church.

1:17 / As one sees from Paul's statement in here (1:17), he is able to relativize the importance of baptism (which the Corinthians apparently think gives them special identities and status) because he understands his call as a call to preach. The sentence begins with **for** and looks back to the last phrase of verse 16, "I don't remember if I baptized anyone else." Baptism is a part of the larger picture of Christian faith and practice, but Paul's principal interest is in the proclamation of the gospel. Given the particular problem in Corinth with the Corinthians' concern with baptism and spiritual boasting, Paul claims that he is thankful that baptism per se was not his primary ministry. Paul understands his primary ministry to be **to preach the gospel, that is, the cross of Christ**.

As Paul continues he creates a remarkable contrast between **wisdom** and the cross—literally, "the wisdom of word" and the cross of Christ. He articulates disdain for sheer eloquence, for in Paul's evaluation, loquacious rhetoric that wins allegiance merely through its beauty is inadequate, since it draws attention to itself or to the one who utters such lovely lines. The good news of God's saving work in the cross of Christ, however, is not a message that is to be sold through elegant presentation. The cross is not a pretty sight, and sheer manipulative eloquence is not a medium that can bear the weight of the message of Christ's cross. Above all, the shocking claim that God saves humanity in the cross of Jesus Christ demonstrates that God works in defiance of this world's norms. Paul's unstated point here is

that the substance of the gospel—the message of the cross of Christ—determines the appropriate style of the proclamation of that message. Human wisdom is smooth and easy to hear, but the gospel confronts humanity with power that is real and urgent, even offensive. Paul’s statements here are an aggressive apology for the form of his work and preaching but also for the gospel itself, which is his ultimate concern. Only as the Corinthians hear and heed the gospel will they exist as the church in the way God intends.

Additional Notes §3

1:10 / Paul uses the title or address **brothers** (Gk. *adelphoi*) regularly in his letters. The word occurs eighty-one times in the undisputed Pauline letters and fourteen times in those that are disputed; the word occurs twenty-seven times in 1 Corinthians. Of these ninety-five uses, sixty-nine occurrences are the vocative form of direct address (which indicates the persons being addressed), sixty-two times in the undisputed letters and seven times in the disputed; the vocative form occurs twenty times in this letter.

The appeal through “the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” is unique in the Pauline letters. Similar phrases are found in his writings, however. He uses the phrases “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (5:4) and “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (6:11) in this letter. In Phil. 2:10 Paul employs the phrase “at/by the name of Jesus.” In these cases Paul invokes the authority, the person, and even the presence of Christ.

1:11 / The identity of Chloe’s household is a riddle without a solution, but Fee (*Epistle*, pp. 54–55) makes a strong, persuasive case for these people’s not being from Corinth. He reasons, in part, that were they Corinthians, they would have been regarded by others as “Paul’s people.” Thus, Paul’s use of a report from them as trustworthy, authoritative witnesses would not have assisted him in the attempt to critique and correct the situation in Corinth. This suggestion is sensible, but it does not settle the matter, as Fee recognizes.

The word translated **quarrels** in the NIV (Gk. *eris*) is referred to as a vice in Paul’s other uses of the term. Cf. Rom. 1:29; 13:13; 1 Cor. 3:3; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:20; Phil. 1:15; 1 Tim. 6:4; Titus 3:9.

1:12 / The references to **Cephas** here and in Gal. 1:18 and 2:11 regularly motivate scholarly discussion of whether in fact Cephas is to be identified with Simon Peter. From time to time suggestions are made that the two are distinct, but such interpretations have not found support among the vast majority of scholars.

P. Lampe (“Theological Wisdom and the ‘Word About the Cross.’ The Rhetorical Scheme in I Corinthians 1–4,” *Int* 44 [1990], pp. 117–31) argues that this reference to **Apollo**s and Cephas is a key to all of Paul’s remarks in 1:18–2:16, wherein Paul makes a covert speech (*schēma*) that critiques the faction among the Corinthians without directly focusing on Apollo and Cephas in a way that could be offensive to them. Earlier, B. Fiore (“‘Covert Allusion’ in 1 Corinthians 1–4,” *CBQ* 47 [1985], pp. 85–102) suggested that the rhetoric that forms 1 Corinthians 1–4 is a recognizable covert technical device (*logos eschēmatismenos*) that Paul abandons only at 4:6 in order to call the Corinthians overtly to focus on the crucified Christ as the locus of the salvation offered to them by God.

Attempts to identify the distinct theological perspectives of those who would claim affiliation with one or the other of those named by Paul here are not persuasive and are necessarily speculative—e.g., W. O. Fitch, “Paul, Apollo, Christ: [1 Cor 1:12],” *Theology* 74 (1971), pp. 18–24.

1:13 / Paul’s vigorous introduction of the matter of baptism in the context of discussing the controversy in Corinth suggests that the Corinthians themselves make much of baptism. Paul’s reference to the exceptional baptismal practice in 15:29 suggests that the Corinthians regard baptism as being more than sacramental; perhaps they view it as magical. Although Paul takes no such view, he does not critique this attitude toward the practices; rather, here he attacks the Corinthians’ attempt to derive status from the ones who baptized them.

1:14 / The textual evidence is divided for this verse. The matter is not serious, but the NIV does not have “to God” after **I am thankful**, whereas NA²⁷ has the words *tō theō* (to God) in the text in brackets. The NRSV reads, “I thank God” and offers a footnote explaining the problem. Some ancient witnesses read simply, “I am thankful” (including \aleph and B), whereas others (including \aleph^2 , C, D) include “to God” in the statement.

1:17 / When Paul says, **Christ did not send me to baptize**, he constructs a negative formula using the verb “to send” (Gk. *apostellō*) that is related to his normal assertion that he is “an apostle [a sent one] of Christ” (1:1). Paul was one who was sent by Christ (to preach), but Christ did not send him primarily to baptize or to preach an ostensibly erudite message. On this issue of the congruence of the messenger with the message, see N. M. Watson, “‘The Philosopher Should Bathe and Brush His Teeth’: Congruence between Word and Deed in Graeco-Roman Philosophy and Paul’s Letter to the Corinthian,” *ABR* 42 (1994), pp. 1–16.

The reference here to **wisdom** (Gk. *sophia*) is rendered **human wisdom** in the NIV to indicate the nuance of Paul’s remark. M. D. Goulder (“*Sophia* in 1 Corinthians,” *NTS* 37 [1991], pp. 516–34) has argued that *sophia* in Paul’s discussion in chs. 1–3 actually refers to the law and law-observance, but there is nothing in Paul’s rhetoric and vocabulary to suggest that he is thinking of the law. R. A. Horsley’s suggestion (“Wisdom of Word and Words of Wisdom in Corinth,” *CBQ* 39

[1977], pp. 224–39) that relates Paul’s comments about wisdom to the Hellenistic-Jewish appreciation as found in Philo and Wisdom of Solomon is much nearer the mark, although the concern for wisdom in Corinth could be non-Jewish in its origin and could reflect a form of religiosity parallel to that of pagan mystery religions—see H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), esp. pp. 14–16, 38–39. As Barrett points out, Paul can use “wisdom” in a variety of ways to indicate both good and bad phenomena. The particular remark and its context determine the understanding the reader should attribute to Paul’s use of the word. Negatively, regardless of the “background” from which “wisdom” originated in Corinth, Paul denounces an understanding of “wisdom” as either “a manner of preaching, involving the use of logical and rhetorical devices which were designed to convince the hearer” or “the stuff of salvation itself” (Barrett, *Epistle*, p. 18).

§4 *God's Peculiar, Powerful Way (1 Cor. 1:18–25)*

This paragraph is crucial, both in the context of this particular letter and for the overall understanding of Paul's theology. Here he delivers the heart and essence of the gospel he believed and proclaimed. Paul's lines reveal that God works in a most peculiar way—first, God works in defiance of the standards of this world as they are understood or construed by humanity, and second, God's work is powerful so that it incapacitates, reverses, even turns upside down the values of this world as they are objectively established and understood by humans. Paul declares this way of God's working as a fact—it is God's saving activity that amounts to the soteriological reality of the cross of Jesus Christ.

1:18 / Paul sets up a rhetorical contrast scheme that captures the heart of the gospel as he understands it. He begins the sentence with the word **For**, showing that it is an extension of his statement in verse 17. Now Paul explains that declaration more precisely in relation to the theme of "the word of the cross," or **the message of the cross**. In speaking of the proclamation of the saving death of Jesus Christ, Paul refers to humanity in two groups. The division he envisions is eschatological, for it supersedes older divisions that were real, but humanly constructed—e.g., Jew and Gentile, Greco-Roman and barbarian, slave and free, male and female—and this eschatological division occurs as an act of God. Thus, on the one hand, there are those who regard the word of the cross as **foolishness**; Paul says they **are perishing**. The word typically translated foolishness (Gk. *mōria*) refers to something stronger or more problematic than that which is merely silliness or simplistic. The English word "moron" comes from the Greek root of this word, so perhaps it should be translated "moronity" to ensure that we see the degree of disdain that those who are perishing have for the message of the cross. On the other hand, there are those **who are being saved**. Paul

includes himself and most likely those to whom he is writing in this group. The passive voice of the verb “being saved” acknowledges that God is the actor, the one who is saving. Moreover, in the scheme of this contrast, perishing versus being saved, one finds foolishness contrasted with **the power of God**. The natural opposite of foolishness in this context would be “wisdom,” so if the Corinthians are paying careful attention they will be surprised at this.

Paul’s rhetoric trips the logic of his readers. Remarkably, Paul says that it is what God does, not what humans know, that saves. God acted in the cross of Christ, and that action produces a division among humanity that itself reveals God’s unexpected power. Paul is not decrying the value of sensible reflection; rather, he is insisting that humans cannot discern the reality of God through their reason based only upon their own experience. God’s self-revelation in the cross is the key to comprehending God, it is the necessary starting point for valid comprehension of the divine, and without the cross we are bound to misunderstand God. The apostle himself employs reason, but always in reflection on the significance of God’s revelation in and through the cross. Paul’s point was not popular among many in the first-century church—witness the attraction to law-observance in Galatia and the fascination with power in 2 Corinthians. Often today people still do not like this message.

1:19 / To underscore the authenticity and authority of his argument, Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14—which is a declaration that records God’s judgment of human wisdom. In the original context in Isaiah the saying is a warning for Israel because of its indifference and arrogance toward God. The saying fits Paul’s argument well, although he changes the original verb “shall be hidden” to read **will frustrate**, so as to fit the citation more precisely to the situation in Corinth. This reference by Paul to Scripture as the evidence or precedent for the way God works through the cross of Christ is not a simple proof-text; it is an eschatological interpretation of the way God is working in the message of the cross. The divine overthrow of human wisdom that God promised is now real through the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul is pointing out that the Corinthians are witnessing—perhaps even experiencing—God’s baffling work.

1:20 / In turn, Paul calls for three groups of persons, **Where is the wise man? . . . the scholar? . . . the philosopher of**

this age? In doing this he may be using synonyms to refer to a collective class of persons, or he may be drawing together different sets that mutually experience the God-created frustration of the message of the cross. Perhaps, given the references to Jews and Greeks in the following verses, one should choose the latter option and understand “the wise [one]” to refer to Greco-Roman philosophers, the “scribe” (NIV = scholar) to designate Jewish experts in the law, and the “debater of this age” (NIV = philosopher of this age) to refer collectively to all those who live and evaluate life by the wisdom of the world.

Paul’s purpose in asking after these people is not self-evident. Perhaps he is summoning them to a challenge, but from the flow of his argument it seems more likely that Paul is indicating that God’s destruction and frustration of the wisdom of the world has dismissed their standards and made their logic irrelevant: **Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?** God has acted in such a way that worldly wisdom becomes moronic, or completely incapable of properly evaluating the significance of God’s work through the cross. Paul’s argument here locates where the wisdom of the merely human wise [one], scholar, and philosopher originate—namely in this age, and therefore not with God.

1:21 / As Paul explains here, God’s **wisdom** exposes the shallowness and inaccuracy of mere human wisdom: even the loftiest theology is **foolishness** if it is disengaged from the primary revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Humans simply cannot reason their way to God. If salvation depended on human reason, then the gospel would depend upon human intelligence and perception, and the message would be for an elite. But God saves humanity (and the world) by the cross of Christ and the message of God’s work done there, which is, by this world’s standards, foolishness. Christ, preached as crucified, brings a crisis of separation. Those who deny the saving significance of the cross are in bondage to **the world**, whereas **those who believe** (1:21) are called by God (1:2), grasped by the power of God—a demonstration that Christ is God’s wisdom. At this juncture in the letter Paul is declaring the significance of the cross and the preaching of Christ crucified, but he constructs rhetorical schemes that proclaim as well as explain. In other words, Paul gives a kerygmatic explanation. In chapter 2 Paul will attempt to explicate God’s work and humanity’s experience of God’s revelation.

1:22–24 / These lines create an evolving rhetorical scheme that contrasts the concerns and experiences of those who judge the message of the cross to be foolishness and do not believe, with the concerns and experiences of those who are called by God and do believe the message of the cross. The first group Paul names comprises both **Jews** and **Greeks**. While the description of these two subgroups draws distinctions between them, they are alike in that the priorities of both cause them to seek evidence of God and authentication of his work in something other than the revelation of God delivered in the message of the cross. Paul says the Jews demand **miraculous signs** on the order of those done by Moses and the prophets. The OT records such works, and the gospels recall that Jesus' Jewish contemporaries insisted that he give them a sign (Matt. 12:38–39; 16:1–4; Mark 8:11–13; Luke 11:15–20; John 6:26–29, 30–34). The Greeks look for **wisdom**. This is a characteristic in Corinth, but the concern with wisdom has been a characteristic of Greek culture and life throughout the self-conscious memory of Greece. Already in Herodotus (ca. 484–420 BC) there are reports of Greek concern with wisdom (1.30, 60, 68), learning (4.77), and foolishness (1.146). Similarly, in Acts one reads, "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new" (17:21). Thus, Paul implies that *power* and *reason* are the worldly standards that precluded certain Jews and Greeks from hearing and believing the message of the cross.

The second group named, **we who preach Christ crucified**, includes Paul and other early Christians. To the demand for power, they present a message of weakness that is offensive, for it tells of a crucified Messiah—an unthinkable paradox for the Jewish mind. To the longing for reason, they present an outright absurdity. In this way, God has defied humanly established criteria for discerning the divine. For Paul, in this rejection of human norms, God truly shows himself to be God precisely because he refuses to let humans dictate terms; and so he acts in sheer defiance of their expectations so that God's own way of working is presented as a saving reality that humans can experience only on God's terms. Humans are forced to shelve their standards and to swallow their pride; they either accept or reject God for who he shows himself to be. But, Paul declares, Jews and Gentiles who hear God's call, who believe in God's saving work in the cross of Christ, receive a revelation of God's true power and wisdom.

1:25 / Finally, Paul summarizes his argument in this whole section by making a theological pronouncement in this verse. He declares that God's wisdom or power expressed in the cross of Christ renders worldly wisdom into foolishness as a demonstration of the reality of the power of God. God shows himself to be both wiser and stronger than humans, who cannot predict or control God!

Additional Notes §4

1:18 / J. Louis Martyn first brought the rhetorical scheme of this verse with its inherent defiance of logic to my attention in a graduate seminar at Union Theological Seminary in New York nearly twenty years ago. His observations on grammar led to incisive remarks about the crux of Paul's theology and provided a springboard for many other insights into Paul's thinking and teaching.

Fee (*Epistle*, p. 68 n. 6) recognizes the infrequent use of the Gk. *sōzomenois* ("the ones being saved") but argues correctly that "this is probably the most comprehensive word in Paul's vocabulary for God's redemptive event."

J. M. Reese ("Paul Proclaims the Wisdom of the Cross: Scandal and Foolishness," *BTB* 9 [1979], pp. 147–53) concluded that Paul presented the crucifixion of Jesus, specifically his death on the cross, as an apocalyptic act in which God created a new form of discernment, an eschatological wisdom that allowed Christians to live in conformity with the cross. For Paul the word of the cross is clearly an unprecedented message that both saves and enlightens the believer as an intervening act of God.

L. Lucy's attempt ("Talbot on Paul as a Universalist," *Christian Scholar's Review* 21 [1992], pp. 395–407) to read 1:18 as Paul's declaration of the reality of eternal destruction that indicates a denial of universalism reads more into the text than out of it. Paul's rhetorical contrast is designed to register that it is what God does, not what humans know, that achieves salvation. Paul is concerned neither to advocate nor to deny universalism in this verse; more relevant to this topic are Rom. 9–11, 1 Cor. 15, and Phil. 2:5–11, although even in these passages Paul is not directly concerned with the theme of universalism.

1:19 / The phrase **for it is written** (Gk. *gegraptai gar*) always signals the citation of the OT in Paul; he cites no other writings in order to argue that God's purposes and promises have been brought to fulfillment. Cf. Rom. 12:19; 14:11; 1 Cor. 3:19; Gal. 3:10; 4:22, 27.

The final verb in the lines from the LXX is "[I] will hide" (Gk. *krypsō*), whereas Paul writes [I] **will frustrate** (*athetēsō*); so there can be no question of his deliberateness here.

1:21 / The verb “to please” (Gk. *eudokeō*) implies both great pleasure and intense discrimination in Paul’s usage. Cf. Rom. 15:26, 27; 1 Cor. 10:5; 2 Cor. 5:8; 12:10; Gal. 1:15; 1 Thess. 2:8; 3:1; Col. 1:19; 2 Thess. 2:12. A. J. M. Wedderburn (“*en tē sophia tou theou*—1 Kor 1:21,” ZNW 64 [1973], pp. 132–34) relates the earlier phrase “in the wisdom of God” to the phrase “God was pleased” to suggest that *en* should be understood to have an adverbial function indicating attendant circumstances, thus “in the wisdom of God” names a divine context to which Paul’s ensuing remarks relate.

Paul says that God’s great pleasure was expressed “through . . . preaching,” and the NIV explicates the sense of Paul’s remark with the translation **through . . . what was preached**, that is, the message of the cross.

1:23 / On the topic of crucifixion in the ancient world, see M. Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). Hengel’s careful survey of ancient literature is helpful, for twentieth-century persons have seen the cross so often as a religious symbol that we forget the brutal reality of this practice and often fail to comprehend how scandalous was the early Christian message of God’s saving humanity through the crucifixion of Jesus.

1:24 / Paul’s alternation in this paragraph between Greeks and Gentiles may be not simply the use of synonyms for good form. In v. 22 he spoke of the Greeks in relation to wisdom, a genuinely Greek concern. Then, in v. 23 he mentioned the Gentiles in relation to the message of Christ crucified, and Gentiles other than Greeks would have found such a message to be morosity. Finally, he refers to the Greeks again in this verse as he returns to the idea of wisdom. Paul frequently refers to Gentiles: forty-seven times in all the letters, thirty-eight in the undisputed epistles—but only three times in 1 Corinthians (1:23; 5:1; 12:2); he speaks of Greeks much less often: thirteen times in all the epistles, twelve times in the undisputed letter—but four times in 1 Corinthians (1:22, 24; 10:32; 12:13).

H.-J. Klauck (“‘Christus, Gottes Kraft und Gottes Weisheit’ [1 Kor 1,24]. Jüdische Weisheitsüberlieferungen im Neuen Testament,” *Wissenschaft und Weisheit* 55 [1992], pp. 3–22) moves toward reading Paul’s remarks in this verse as articulating a wisdom Christology; but as A. van Roon (“The Relation between Christ and the Wisdom of God according to Paul,” *NovT* 16 [1974], pp. 207–39) recognizes, Paul’s letters do not present a wisdom christology that would work from an identification of Christ with Wisdom as Wisdom is presented in Hellenistic-Jewish Wisdom literature. Indeed, as R. A. Horsley (“Wisdom,” pp. 224–39) correctly recognizes, “Paul rejects *sophia* as the means of salvation (1:21–24) by replacing it with the crucified Christ as the true ‘power’ and ‘wisdom’ of God” (p. 237).

§5 *Before and After God's Call (1 Cor. 1:26–31)*

The verses of this paragraph are packed with theological substance and significance. Paul directs the Corinthians to remember and reflect upon themselves both when they were called (*at* or *before* the time of their call) and *in* or *after* their calling. Before God chose them most of the Corinthians were nobodies. After being called by God, however, the Corinthians are instruments of God's own power with Christ Jesus as the source of their lives. To make this argument Paul engages in a careful, deliberate play on the LXX version of Jeremiah 9:23–24. His citation of Scripture is clear in verse 31, where he quotes Jeremiah 9:24 LXX; but already in verses 26–27 mentions of the wise, the influential, and the strong echo the language of Jeremiah. Paul creates this contrast scheme to humble the Corinthians in order to check their boasting and heighten their appreciation for the saving work of God in Jesus Christ. Paul tells the Corinthians that in light of what God has done in Jesus Christ the only legitimate boasting that Christians can do is to boast about what God has done.

1:26 / Paul begins this section of the letter with the word “for” (untranslated in the NIV), because he is explaining what he had said in verses 18–25 through personal illustration and application to the Corinthians. His remarks to the Corinthians are clear and straightforward: “brothers and sisters” (in the NIV, **brothers**; see the discussion of this form of salutation in the commentary on 1:10–17). Paul tells the Corinthians to **think** about their calling—this admonition may be either a command (imperative) or an observation (indicative), since the same form of the word serves both purposes in Greek; yet the tone seems directive. The remark continues the theme of calling that Paul registered at 1:1, 2, 9, 24. His concern at this point, however, is specifically related to who the Corinthians were at the time of their calling. Paul wants the Corinthians to recognize that God

did not choose them according to the standards of the world (“according to the flesh”; Gk. *kata sarka*; NIV = **by human standards**). Thus, God’s way of relating to the Corinthians actually judges their standards, revealing their inadequacy and the inappropriateness of the way some of them have been evaluating others (including Paul). Paul explicitly denies that many of the Corinthians were **wise, . . . influential, . . . of noble birth**. The language at this point reflects Jeremiah 9:23 LXX with some changes:

Paul: “wise ones” (*sophoi*)
 Jeremiah: “wise one” (*sophos*)

Paul: “influential ones” (*dynatoi*)
 Jeremiah: “mighty one” (*ischyros*)

Paul: “well-born” (*eugeneis*; NIV has “of noble birth”)
 Jeremiah: “wealthy one” (*plousios*)

In the first case, the difference between Paul and Jeremiah is simply that Paul has used a plural rather than a singular. In the second case, the difference is the slight one between *influence* as social strength and *might* as raw physical power. In the third case, the difference is between heritage and accumulated assets. Jeremiah’s remark was inclusive and meant to name those who would be self-satisfied with their physical goods. Paul’s reference to being well-born could relate to wealth, but the connection is not necessary.

The language may reflect the Corinthians’ own boasts. Indeed, in the verses that follow, Paul’s remarks will locate his rhetorical audience—although the identities of those to whom Paul speaks are not to be pressed excessively. Verse 26 has been simplistically interpreted in a literal fashion in the past: commentators have suggested that the members of the early church were from the low, even lowest, classes of society. But the text merely recognizes that only some of the Corinthian Christians were from the upper classes of social order. The church was likely made up predominantly of middle-class craftspersons and merchants, and persons who were well-to-do, as well as slaves, some of whom could have been people of means and education (cf. 7:21–24). The most remarkable sociological feature of the early church was that it was genuinely transsocial, including members from all classes of society. But Paul is not here primarily concerned with sociology; rather, his point is theological—God is no

respector of persons! God freely chooses whomever God pleases at will, and not in a manner beholden to human standards. God’s grace does not necessarily correlate to social order or human patterns of evaluation.

1:27–28 / Paul extends the basic rhetoric of verse 26 in these two verses, and the lines reflect the language of Jeremiah even more closely than before. The initial word “but” calls attention to the juxtaposition of these lines to the preceding remarks and prepares for the ensuing contrast scheme in these verses. Again, Paul offers three sets of comparisons:

<u>IN OPPOSITION TO:</u>	<u>GOD CHOSE:</u>
the wise	the foolish things of the world
the strong	the weak things of the world
the things that are	the lowly things of [the] world, the despised things—and the things that are not.

God’s choices defy and demolish the logic, power, and recognized standards of the world. God’s freedom and sovereignty are demonstrated in God’s inexplicable actions that reveal God’s grace.

Paul’s rhetoric explicitly states the purposes of God’s seemingly odd choices. First, God’s actions **shame** the wise and the strong. In both the LXX and the NT the word for shame (Gk. *kataischynō*) means “to be disgraced,” particularly as a result of divine judgment. Thus, the verb implicitly registers eschatological divine action. Second, Paul says God chose **the lowly, the despised, and the things that are not** in order to **nullify the things that are**. In other words, God chose nobodies or low-bodies to undo the somebodies of this world. To nullify (Gk. *katargeō*) indicates divine eschatological elimination, as one sees from the consistent use of this verb in Romans and 1 and 2 Corinthians. Paul uses this rhetorical flourish to confront the Corinthians with the fact that God’s calling of them, like God’s saving action through the cross of Christ, defies the world’s standards and even judges those standards to be inadequate and inaccurate. In doing this God reveals a graciousness and authority that is independent of the world’s norms and judgments.

1:29 / Paul continues to explain the purpose of God’s choices by completing the sentence that began with verse 26. This final clause states what God’s ultimate purpose is in making choices that themselves have the aims of shaming and nullifying

those who are recognized by the world. Paul says God disgraced and disqualified those who are honored in the world **so that** no human could **boast before** God. The cross of Christ and the calling of the most lowly Corinthians occurred so as to eliminate the possibility that humans would feel self-satisfied and would arrogantly elevate themselves before God. Paul makes frequent use of the verb **to boast** (in the NT outside the thirteen Pauline letters only James employs this verb [twice]). For Paul “to boast” is to do far more than merely to brag or to self-promote. For a human “to boast” is for the person to glorify the self in a way that either refuses to recognize God or presumes that God is bound to recognize the human’s status. Paul can use this verb positively with the connotation that humans recognize the glory of God’s actions and “boast” of what God has done (see Rom. 2:17; 5:2, 11; 1 Cor. 1:29, 31; 2 Cor. 10:17; Phil. 3:3). In the present verse Paul has human self-satisfied and self-praising boasting in mind.

1:30 / Here, Paul again addresses the Corinthians directly. This new sentence informs them of what they should already know, but apparently have forgotten—that it is by God’s own work that they have been established in Christ Jesus. The Corinthians have whatever life they now live only as a result of God’s work in and through Christ, not by means of their own efforts. Thus, by God’s own actions Christ Jesus has become **wisdom**—unlike that of the world—to and for the Corinthians. Jesus Christ informs the Corinthians of who God is and how God relates to humanity. Paul explains Christ as wisdom **from God** in an explanatory phrase (the NIV casts his argument well), **that is**, [Christ Jesus is] **our righteousness, holiness, and redemption**. Thus, Paul’s focus is on God’s saving work in Christ; he is not elaborating abstract christology here. As God unsettles the world’s wisdom in Christ and eliminates the possibility of humans laying claims on God’s grace, God demonstrates a peculiar power that sets people (by God’s choice) right with God (righteousness), sets people apart for God’s purposes and service (holiness—as in *sanctification*, not a status but an identity in terms of devotion to God’s intentions), and delivers people from estrangement from God for devotion to and a relationship with God. The description of salvation that Paul offers here is not strictly sequential; rather, he refers to facets of the gem of grace. At most, Paul’s observations may mean that humans are re-

deemed as God’s work in Christ Jesus sets them right and sets them apart.

1:31 / Paul returns to the theme of boasting, although now he has a positive image in mind. He explains the reasonable results of God’s justifying, sanctifying, and redeeming work. His point is self-evident: God is the source of legitimate Christian glory. Paul modifies a quotation from Jeremiah so that it fits the Corinthian situation more precisely. Jeremiah says, “Let the one who boasts boast about this”—this line introduces the legitimate reasons for boasting (“‘that [the person] understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,’ declares the Lord”). Paul does not give the full quotation, rather he replaces “about this” with **in the Lord** and thus truncates the statement so that it defines for the Corinthians appropriate boasting. In Paul’s declaration, the Lord is Christ Jesus who has been identified in the saving activity that Paul delineated in verse 30. Recognition of the lordship of Christ Jesus is the key to correcting the situation in Corinth.

Additional Notes §5

On the profound theological content and implications of the verses of this section, see L. E. Keck, “God the Other Who Acts Otherwise: An Exegetical Essay on 1 Cor. 1:26–31,” *Word & World* 16 (1996), pp. 437–43.

1:26 / **By human standards:** literally this is “according to the flesh” (Gk. *kata sarka*). The phrase occurs nineteen times in the Pauline letters, twice in 1 Cor. (1:26; 10:18). The dynamic equivalence translation of the NIV catches the sense of Paul’s statement, but the phrase “according to the flesh” is important for Paul. He uses this phrase to name the world with its human standards over against the new creation of God that is presently struggling toward full realization through the cross of Jesus Christ. The incisive work of J. Louis Martyn (“Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages: 2 Corinthians 5:16,” in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox* [ed. W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, and R. R. Niebuhr; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967], pp. 269–87) on this phrase, esp. its occurrence in 2 Cor. 5:16, demonstrates that for Paul there are two ways of knowing: either *kata sarka* or *kata stauron*—which is either according to the old age or according to

the “painful and gracious juncture” of the ages brought about through Christ’s cross (“Epistemology,” p. 285 n. 1).

In the past, scholars have assumed, based on v. 26, that the Corinthian Christians were of the lowest social classes—e.g., G. A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World* (trans. L. R. M. Strachan; 1927; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995) and *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History* (2d ed.; trans. W. E. Wilson; 1926; repr., New York: Harper, 1957). Recent interpreters employing sophisticated sociological methods of interpretation have come to see the church as comprised of a mixture of social classes, most likely dominated by the members of the urban middle class. See E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* (London: Tynedale, 1960), esp. pp. 49–61; R. MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1974); G. Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), esp. pp. 69–119, and *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics, and the World of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), esp. pp. 159–227; A. J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Baton Rouge/London: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1983); and J. E. Stambaugh and D. L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Library of Early Christianity 2; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), esp. pp. 107–67.

1:27–28 / The presence of the contrasting phrases **the things that are not** (Gk. *ta mē onta*) and **the things that are** (Gk. *ta onta*) sometimes provokes philosophical discussions of creation, but as Fee (*Epistle*, p. 83) correctly recognizes, Paul’s employment of the verb **to nullify** (cf. 2:6; 6:13; 13:8 [2x], 10; 15:24, 26) “makes certain that this is rhetorical, eschatological language, not philosophical.” Outside of 1 Cor. “to nullify” (*katargeō*) occurs in the Pauline letters in Rom. 3:3, 31; 4:14; 6:6; 7:2, 6; 2 Cor. 3:7, 11, 13–14; Gal. 3:17; 5:4, 11; Eph. 2:15; 2 Thess. 2:8; 2 Tim. 1:10.

1:29 / **So that** translates the Gk. word *hopōs*, which is coupled here with the negative particle *mē* and a subjunctive form of the verb “to boast” (Gk. *kauchaomai*), a construction that clearly and strongly indicates a statement of purpose.

1:30 / The theological vocabulary of this verse is complex and rich with significance. **Righteousness** (Gk. *dikaiosynē*) is a central term in Paul’s reflections on soteriology—“For Paul *dikaiosynē* stands in close relation to the central salvific event, which has its historical place in the death and resurrection of Jesus” (EDNT 1:326). Righteousness is granted to the human as grace, but it demands a complete service of righteousness in a transformed life of obedience to God. **Holiness** (Gk. *hagiasmos*) denotes *consecration*, so that “through God’s calling and Christ’s work of redemption those who believe are saints,” i.e., *holy people* who are set apart through divine action—“they have not created

their own salvation" (EDNT 1:19). **Redemption** (Gk. *apolytrōsis*) in Paul's usages refers to the central content of the gospel.

It denotes the "redemption" which God offers in the death of God's Son; its location, therefore, is "in Christ Jesus" . . . Redemption is God's gracious turning to humanity in its need for redemption, and this grace is experienced as remission of sins—in faith in Jesus Christ. [The word can designate] Jesus Christ as the redeemer himself. (EDNT 1:138)

1:31 / Paul's citation of Jer. 9:24 LXX is remarkable. Jeremiah reads, *all' ē en toutō kauchasthō ho kauchōmenos*; but Paul cites, *ho kauchōmenos en kyriō kauchasthō*. He rearranges the words and even alters the phrase to make it a call to boasting in Christ Jesus rather than in oneself. This seemingly minor change reflects and reveals Paul's concerns, strategy, and goal in 1 Cor. Paul is concerned with the Corinthians' inappropriate boasting that results from sheer confidence in themselves and that indicates a lack of recognition of God's gracious work in Christ. He employs rhetoric and the force of tradition to call the Corinthians to a proper way of thinking and living, and he aims at firmly fixing the focus of the congregation's life on God as revealed through Christ Jesus.

G. R. O'Day's helpful study of 1 Cor. 1:26–31 ("Jeremiah 9:22–23 and 1 Corinthians 1:26–31: A Study in Intertextuality," *JBL* 109 [1990], pp. 259–67) examines verbal, structural, and theological parallels between Paul and Jeremiah to conclude, "Jeremiah's critique of wisdom, power, and wealth as false sources of identity that violate the covenant are re-imaged by Paul as a critique of wisdom, power, and wealth that impede God's saving acts in Jesus Christ" (p. 267).