

WHITE MEMORIAL — PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH —

WMPC - Men's Bible Study

First Corinthians - Winter-Spring 2017

Lesson 2

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18 - 2:16

Three Questions:

Q1: Begin by reading 1 Corinthians 1:18 aloud, at least 3 times. Write a paragraph about what you think it means: to you; to the church; the world outside of the church. Can you make an argument that 1:18 is among the central claims of the Christian faith?

Q2: From 1:19 to 2:16 Paul uses layers and layers of rhetoric. What is rhetoric? Do you think it is useful when writing about the Lord, teaching about the Lord, or preaching about the Lord? Why do you think Paul is using this thick, layered, rhetoric? Take it one step further: do you prefer rhetoric in scripture (not that we have a choice!) or do you prefer "straight talk" about Jesus (if we are given a choice)?

Q3: Wisdom: what does Paul mean by wisdom?
Mature: what does Paul mean by mature?
Spiritual: what does Paul mean by Spiritual?
Spirit: Why do we receive the Spirit according to Paul (2:12)?
Unspiritual: what do you think Paul means by unspiritual?

Three Insights:

I1: J Paul Samplly, from Boston University writes of verse 1:18 in the *New Interpreter's Bible* the following:

Beginning in 1:18, and indeed running through 2:5, Paul takes the Corinthians "back to the basics," back to the crux of the community-founding gospel he first proclaimed to them. The passage is a complex of contrasts in which Paul's purpose seems to be to create the largest possible separation or distinction. Nuance and subtlety give way to hyperbole. (New Interpreter's Bible, volume X, page 810).

I2: We think it is fair to say that the cross is the center of Paul's theological understanding of Jesus and the Christian faith. For Matthew we might say it was the law as interpreted through Christ. For John we might say it was the mystical and supernatural identity of the Word made flesh and the signs he gave us to prove his efficacy and Lordship. For Luke we might say it was the mission of God through Jesus to find the lost, share the good news with the world, and tell the story of Jesus raised from the dead to the ends of the world. For Paul, none of this thinking can be understood without understanding the cross. This cross-centered theological backdrop is the frame of the entire Book of Romans and it is the driving force of the rhetoric of our verses

today. Paul rightly understands that to the Jews — people of the law — and the Greeks — people of wisdom, sophistics, philosophers — the cross presents a challenge. It challenges our typical ways of thinking — why would God willingly die / willingly lose a son? — and requires a leap of faith to either accept or understand. As William Barclay points out (Daily Bible Study Series, Letters to the Corinthians, page 20), this leap of faith is precisely what is required:

It looked as if the Christian message had little chance of success against the backgrounds of Jewish and Greek life; but as Paul said [verse 1:25 - which is VERY key verse to understanding Paul's theology] 'What looks like foolishness is wiser than men's wisdom; and what looks like God's weakness is stronger than men's strength.'

I3: Again, a helpful note from J Paul Samplly:

Paul's letters never use the term "Christian." What moderns would call a "Christian" Paul calls a "spiritual person," that is, one who has received the Holy Spirit. So Paul's primary definition of the believer is by means of the Spirit; likewise, the reception of the Spirit is for Paul the hallmark of entry into the community. Modern Christians ought to wonder from this why so many make so little over the Spirit and its working in the life of faith and in the community. Many modern Christians are Spirit-poor; Paul and his earliest followers were Spirit-rich. It is fair to suppose that the difference lies not in the Spirit's having disappeared but in modern believers' failure to note, appreciate, and cultivate the Spirit's workings. (New Interpreter's Bible, volume X, page 824).

Links for further study:

L1: Rembrandt's Paul the Apostle. What do you make of it? Beyond the darkness, note the light, note the pen, the paper, the intellectual tension, the intensity. We love this painting.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_the_Apostle#/media/File:Saint_Paul,_Rembrandt_van_Rijn_\(and_Workshop%3F\),_c._1657.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_the_Apostle#/media/File:Saint_Paul,_Rembrandt_van_Rijn_(and_Workshop%3F),_c._1657.jpg)

L2: The conversion of Saul / birth of Paul (as told to us in Acts 9) by Michaelangelo. See the hosts of heaven bearing down on him. Could the weight of the heavenly message account for Paul's intensity? This too is a painting worth a deep and long study by all who would seek to understand Paul.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_the_Apostle#/media/File:Conversion_of_Saint_Paul_\(Michelangelo_Buonarroti\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_the_Apostle#/media/File:Conversion_of_Saint_Paul_(Michelangelo_Buonarroti).jpg)