

# Commentary

2:6-16 has been used to justify many wrong ideas, not least that there are two levels of Christian experience. Some Christians (it is claimed) are 'the mature' (6) (in contrast to the immature): there's 'the natural man who does not accept the things of the Spirit' and 'the spiritual person' who does, whose opinions are 'to be judged by no-one' (14-15). At its most extreme, this means: if you agree with us you are spiritual, and if you don't you're not.

The key decision is who these two groups of people are. And the best way to decide is to tie this passage closely to the context (since 1:18).

Paul's point has been that this world always stumbles over the gospel, and despises the church and its preachers because it is completely blind to God's purposes and to where true power and wisdom are to be found: in particular, the non-Christian will always think the gospel 'folly' (1:18, 23). BUT ... to the Christian the gospel is 'the wisdom of God' (1:24).

It makes sense therefore to understand the 'mature' of 2:6 as all Christians for we are the ones who have come to understand God's secret wisdom (7), that is, the gospel of salvation through a crucified Messiah. For all of us Christians, what Paul imparted was not something additional to the saving message of Christ crucified, but rather he simply continues to unfold all of God's purposes, 'even the depths of God' (10) which can be summed up in the phrases 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' or 'the word of the cross'.

This gospel remains folly to non-Christians, 'the natural person' of 14, who 'does not accept the things of the Spirit of God': as Paul has already said, human wisdom can never find this out (- could even the biggest intellect *make up* the Christian gospel?!). The only reason why we know anything of this is because 'God has revealed to us through the Spirit' (10a). And this is why the revealing work of the Spirit is the main theme of the passage.

Two further questions first.

(a) why does Paul say this here?

Paul is expanding on 1:18, 19-21 and explaining why there are such wildly differing responses to Paul's-which-is-God's gospel. The reason is to be found in whether someone is humble enough to accept that they can know nothing of God apart from the work of God's spirit, which is ...

(b) why does he refer to Christians as 'the mature'?

There's good reason to think that (at least, some) groups of the Corinthian Christians thought they were mature (indeed, too mature for Paul's rather basic 'milk' cf 2:2). Paul will use biting sarcasm in 4:8f, and here it's as if he's saying: 'you so-called 'mature' Christians are actually just like those without the Spirit ... for you are valuing the very things they value - worldly wisdom, what seems powerful, and the outwardly impressive. True spiritual maturity will value the work of the Spirit, which is ...

So what then is the work of the Spirit? Here's is John Stott's outline:

## **The Holy Spirit is the *searching* Spirit** (10b-11)

I cannot know what you are thinking, and I cannot read your mind. Only you know what is inside you. It's the same with God. The assumption is that God is personal (not just 'a force' or 'a power'), and like a person, God himself alone knows what's inside God himself.

Knowing 'the depths' became a slogan of later quasi-Christian groups who claimed to know things about God that no-one else did: maybe Paul is implying here that it's not special groups that have inside knowledge (like one of the groups of 1:10-13?), but only the Spirit himself.

## **The Holy Spirit is the *revealing* Spirit** (10a, 12)

What has God 'freely given us' (12)? Not just God's salvation (1:12) but also the Spirit who enables us to understand that salvation. How could an apostle Paul know all that he did to be able to write all the wonderful NT letters we now possess? Only because he'd received the Holy Spirit to reveal it to him. If v 11 is true, none of us can hope to know 'the thoughts of God' unless and until the Holy Spirit tells us (cf Isaiah 55:8-11).

## **The Holy Spirit is the *inspiring* Spirit** (13)

2:12 is about what the apostles 'received'; 2:13 about what they 'speak'. Just as the Holy Spirit did not keep to himself what he searched out, so the apostles did not keep to themselves what was revealed to them. If we ask how Paul imparts to us what the Holy Spirit taught him, the answer is 'through the pages of the NT'. This verse/passage is perhaps one of the clearest expositions of the doctrine of Scripture, with a claim here to 'verbal inspiration' (ie not just that the Bible's authors were inspired in the general ideas they expressed, but also in the very words they used).

All Christians therefore know that words matter: we're not pedants for pedantry's sake but for God's sake for he took such trouble to guard what was communicated to us, even to this level of detail.

## **The Holy Spirit is the *enlightening* Spirit** (13b-16)

These last verses are precious to all of us who find it difficult to understand the Bible. God, in his generous provision for all our need, is, by his Spirit, just as active in the Bible reader as in the Bible writer. The same Spirit is at work in us as in the apostles.

This doesn't mean that we can claim to be 'inspired' as the apostles were. But 2:15 says that Christians are able to 'discern' or 'evaluate' (- it's the same word as 'discerned' in verse 14): the things to which previously we were spiritually blind, now begin to make sense to us. We remain an enigma to those who can no more make sense of us and our beliefs than they could naturally know anything of God himself. To say 'we have the mind of Christ' is simply to say again that the Spirit has revealed the things of God himself to us, and enlightened us to understand them.

# 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

Study Outline

## Launching question

A friend of yours announces suddenly at work one day that he's decided to embark on a spiritual search to try to find God. Whatever you might actually say to him, what would you think about that comment/prospect?

## The story so far ... *(important to get this clear to set up tonight's study)*

What has Paul said so far about how God upturns things?  
(... what does 1:25 mean? what is the foolishness of God? how is it 'wise')?  
How specifically does anyone come to know God?

## READ 2:6-16

*This study does not ask the question 'who are "the mature"?: you'll need to decide if you think it would be better to go into all that!*

What is the 'message of wisdom' (NIV) in 2:6 that Paul preaches?  
Make a list of all the things that verses 6-9 tell us about this 'wisdom'.  
What does Paul specifically say about people in the world understanding this?  
So how did we come to understand this? what has to happen if we are to?

This is great passage on the work of the Holy Spirit and how anyone comes to know God, and so be saved.

## RE-READ 2:10-16

Why do we need the Holy Spirit if we are to know 'the thoughts of God' (11)?  
What is his unique qualification when it comes to revealing God to us?  
Who alone naturally knows God?  
What has the Holy Spirit done with all that he's searched out about God?

How does the 'wisdom' about God get from the Holy Spirit all the way to us?  
How do these verses help us to have a clear understanding of Scripture?  
Why do translations of the Bible matter?  
Does it matter if Christians (eg in our HG) are inaccurate about Bible words?

How does the Holy Spirit help me when I read the Bible?  
How is this a great encouragement to me?  
What does this imply about how I should read the Bible?  
In what ways do Christians today divide 'the Word' and 'the Spirit'?

## Thinking it through

How will this passage affect ... how you read the Bible for yourself?  
... how you pray for non-Christian friends?  
... and what about your friend's spiritual search (cf Launching Question)?  
Who is actually doing any searching out of God?  
How will your friend find God: what needs to happen according to 2:6-16?

# 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

Study 4

## Summary

Corinth was New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas all rolled into one. It was the Roman Empire's second city, and a centre for commerce, popular culture, mishmash-religion and pleasure. Paul's trip there in Acts 18:1-17 grew a church in the midst of hostility and inter-community tension. Within 2-3 years, Paul writes this letter responding to news brought by Chloe (1:11) and to issues raised in a letter they'd written to him (7:1).

In ch 1-4, as Paul confronts divisions in the church, look out for themes of ...

- worldly ways of thinking (eg exalting individual leaders, or their polished public speaking, stressing form over content);
  - over-realised eschatology (ie bringing into the present some of the blessings God promises us for heaven), producing a triumphalism where individuals have an inflated view of their own maturity;
  - what is authentic Christian ministry (and defending Paul's own ministry).
- Ch 1-4 is really a pastoral sermon on the theme of **true wisdom and false**.

## The story so far ...

To this Corinthian church, divided through exalting certain Christian leaders at the expense of others, Paul has been writing to exalt God. It is God's church (1:2), and everything they are and have comes from him (1:4f). The gospel Paul preaches seems unimpressive precisely so that God's wisdom and God's power triumph over human imitations (1:18-25). The church too (if we're honest) is ordinary, but this is so that we boast in the God who saves us, not in any categories of human social climbing (1:26-31). Even Paul deliberately renounced contemporary notions of 'a good speaker' in favour of 'the word of the cross' (and any true Christian preacher will do the same) so that all we trust in is God's powerful gospel (2:1-5).

## Theme Sentence

We can't know God apart from the Holy Spirit revealing him to us.

## Ideas for application

- The Word and Spirit belong to each other. The only Holy Spirit the Bible knows is the one who reveals God to us through the pages of Scripture. So let's be very careful not to separate what God has joined
- The task of Bible reading is 'spiritual' and not merely mechanical: we need the Holy Spirit to 'interpret' spiritual truths to us. So trying to read the Bible without prayer, depending on the Holy Spirit, is futile.
- No-one can know God except the Christian way, by the Holy Spirit.