

# FIRST CORINTHIANS

## Chapter 2

*Proclaiming Christ Crucified*

**And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.**

**2:1** *When I came to you.* On his initial trip to Corinth c. A.D. 51 (Ac 18). (CSB)

Cf Ac 18:1–17; Paul’s second missionary journey. (TLSB)

God’s decision to save the world through the lowly message of the cross (1:18–25) had been illustrated by his calling so many lowly people to form the Corinthian church (1:26–31). With the words “and I” (καὶ γώ), Paul now introduces a second illustration: himself. The “weak” and “foolish” nature of the Gospel had also been illustrated by the lack of showiness in his own preaching (2:1–2) and personal bearing (2:3) in the early days of his ministry among the Corinthians. (CC p. 83)

*with lofty speech or wisdom.* Perhaps Apollos (Ac 18:24–28) had influenced the Corinthians in such a way that they were placing undue emphasis on eloquence and intellectual ability. (CSB)

καθ’ ὑπεροχὴν—Literally, “according to superiority” of speech or wisdom. κατά here means “in accordance with.” In nonbiblical Greek, the verb ὑπερέχω does not mean merely to excel, but “to rise above,” “to tower [over],” “to surpass.” The LXX uses the verb for Daniel “surpassing” all the wise men of Babylon (Dan 5:11). In the NT both the noun and the verb are applied to the superior position of rulers (participles of ὑπερέχω in 1 Pet 2:13 and Rom 13:1; ὑπεροχή in 1 Tim 2:2) Aristotle applied ὑπεροχή to the sense of superiority felt by the eloquent speaker. (CC p. 81)

Paul spent 18 months in Corinth testifying that the Christ was Jesus (Ac 18:5, 11). (TLSB)

**2:2** The heart of the Gospel is Jesus’ atoning sacrifice, “the power of God” (1:18). Paul contrasted his simpler, focused missionary message with the more complex ideas of other teachers (e.g., Apollos, Cephas). (TLSB)

*I decided – ἔκρινα*—This does not necessarily mean that in coming to Corinth from his disappointing visit to Athens Paul “resolved” to adopt a new approach which did not rely so much on rhetoric and philosophy. Fee explains that “to say ‘I resolved’ means nothing more than that he purposed to continue his regular practice (cf. Gal. 3:1).” His resolve may have been sharpened by recent experiences with “flatterers” and “man pleasers” in Thessalonica (1 Thess 2:1–10). It may have been sharpened even more by his determination to distance himself from the sophists. Upon arrival in a city, a sophist would sometimes declaim on a topic suggested by the audience in order to show off his eloquence and win their approval. Paul’s topic had long been predetermined by his commission to preach only Christ crucified. (CC p. 82)

*know nothing ... except Jesus Christ.* Paul resolved to make Christ the sole subject of his teaching and preaching while he was with them. (CSB)

This does not mean that Paul was totally lacking in rhetorical and debating ability. As a writer, he was a stylist of note. It would seem, however, that this was not matched by his ability as a speaker, a deficiency which seemed all the greater in comparison with the eloquence of Apollos. Paul's critics, at least, considered him a poor speaker, claiming that while "his letters are weighty and strong, ... his bodily presence is *weak* and his speech *contemptible*" (2 Cor 10:10; cf. 2 Cor 11:6). (CC p. 84)

*Jesus Christ.* See 1:30. (CSB)

*him crucified.* See 1:17–18, 23. (CSB)

**2:3** *weakness* – Paul's weakness and that of his hearers emphasized God's power. (TLSB)

*fear...trembling* – There was violent opposition to his message from the Jews in Corinth (Ac 18:12–17). Paul was meek, perhaps also recalling the beating, rioting, and indifference he experienced on the mission trip (Ac 16:16–17:34). (TLSB)

Jesus Christ had been crucified "in weakness" (2 Cor 13:4). In solidarity with his Lord, Paul too had carried out his ministry in suffering and weakness (1 Cor 2:3; Phil 3:10). Not only was Paul's presence as a public speaker unimpressive (2 Cor 10:10), but he suffered recurrent attacks of a debilitating malady (Gal 4:13; cf. 2 Cor 12:7). (CC p. 85)

**2:4** *not with plausible words.* This does not give preachers a license to neglect study and preparation. Paul's letters reveal a great deal of knowledge in many areas of learning, and his eloquence is apparent in his address before the Areopagus. Paul's point is that unless the Holy Spirit works in a listener's heart, the wisdom and eloquence of a preacher are ineffective. Paul's confidence as a preacher did not rest on intellectual and oratorical ability, as did that of the Greek orators. (CSB)

*demonstration.* The Greek word is used of producing proofs in an argument in court. Paul's preaching was marked by the convincing demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit. (CSB)

Miracles. The Spirit creates faith through Jesus' miraculous death, resurrection, and His gift. (TLSB)

**2:1–5** The Good News is conveyed not through eloquence, but through humble messengers testifying about the cross. We look there for God's power and rest in His wisdom. • Dear Lord, thank You for revealing Yourself to me by Your cross. Receive this weak sinner and strengthen me for service. Amen. (TLSB)

*Wisdom From the Spirit*

**6 Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. 7 But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9 But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"—10 these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11 For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. 13 And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are**

**spiritual.14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. 15 The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. 16 “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.**

**2:6** Up to this point, Paul has been warning the Corinthians that to rely on human wisdom is incompatible with preaching the “foolish” message of Christ crucified (see 1:18–25). But now, to ward off the possible misunderstanding that he is opposed to wisdom in any form, as if Christianity had *no* wisdom to offer, he adds this: “*Wisdom*, however, is what we speak” (2:6). In the Greek text, “wisdom” (σοφία) is placed first for emphasis. Wisdom, true wisdom, was indeed to be found in the preaching of Paul and his associates. Christ himself is the wisdom from God, wisdom that brings righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1:30). (CC p. 89)

*mature.* Wise, developed Christians; contrast the “infants” mentioned in 3:1 (see Heb 5:13–6:3). (CSB)

Well-grounded in the faith, benefiting from a deeper understanding (cf 14:20). (TLSB)

ν τοῖς τελείοις—Hays notes that the term “the mature” (οἱ τέλειοι) “appears frequently in the writings of Philo of Alexandria to describe those who have arrived at an advanced stage of spiritual insight and perfection. Presumably, the Corinthian wisdom-enthusiasts described themselves in this way, in contrast to the [νήπιοι], the ‘infants’ or novices of lesser spiritual attainment.” (CC p. 87)

**2:7** *secret.* Cf. Ro 16:25–26; Eph 3:4–5; 1Ti 3:16. The secret, or mystery, was once hidden but is now known because God has revealed it to his people (v. 10). To unbelievers it is still hidden. (CSB)

Paul’s message is hidden only from a sinful and unreceptive world. (TLSB)

*before the ages* – Before creation. (TLSB)

In contrast to the wisdom of this age (2:6), the apostolic message has permanent value. For unlike the wisdom of this age and of its rulers, the apostolic message conveys *God’s* wisdom. In the Greek of 2:7, “God’s” is placed before “wisdom” for emphasis. The apostolic preaching is not a human message and cannot be evaluated by human criteria. It is “God’s wisdom in [the form of] a mystery, the hidden [wisdom] which God foreordained before the ages for our glory” (2:7). Jesus had praised the Father for concealing the mystery of the Gospel from the wise and understanding, and revealing it to babies (Mt 11:25; Lk 10:21). In Romans, Paul too breaks out in doxology for the proclamation of the Gospel, “according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed” (Rom 16:25–26). Foreshadowed in the OT from Gen 3:15 on, the full light of the Gospel, eagerly anticipated by many prophets and righteous people (1 Pet 1:10–12), had burst on the world in the incarnation and ministry of Jesus (Mt 13:16–17; cf. also Col 1:26) and was being revealed in the apostolic preaching. (CC pp . 90-91)

*for our glory.* God’s wisdom will cause every believer to share eventually in Christ’s glory (Ro 8:17). (CSB)

Realized in the world to come. (TLSB)

ἰς δόξαν ἡμῶν—“Glory” (δόξα) has an eschatological ring. The Christian looks forward to the day when “the body of our humiliation will be changed into conformity with the body of his [Christ’s] glory” (Phil 3:21). “The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed” (Rom

8:18; cf. 8:17, 21; 9:23). Believers have, indeed, already been glorified in hope (Rom 8:30). Kittel notes: (CC p. 88)

**2:8** *rulers of this age*. Such as the chief priests (Lk 24:20), Pilate and Herod Antipas (cf. Ac 4:27). (CSB)

The leaders at Jerusalem or the spiritual rulers and authorities against which we contend (Eph 6:12). (TLSB)

“None of the rulers of this age recognized” the wisdom of the Gospel (2:8). During the crucifixion, Jesus had prayed for them, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). According to Paul’s sermon in Pisidian Antioch, it was because the residents of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize him or understand the words of the prophets that they fulfilled those words by condemning him (Acts 13:27; cf. Peter’s words in Acts 3:17). Thus Jesus, Peter, and Paul all acknowledge that the rulers acted in ignorance. (CC p. 91)

*understood* – ἔγνωκεν—This verb does not denote merely intellectual knowledge, but spiritual recognition “of the divine plan of salvation ... a knowledge which penetrates the βάθη τοῦ θεοῦ because it rests on the divinely given πνεῦμα [1 Cor 2:10].” (CC p. 88)

*crucified the Lord of glory*. The cross is here contrasted with the majesty of the victim. (CSB)

Jesus is the embodiment of glory and the source of our glory (cf v 7). “God’s Son truly suffered for us. However, He did so according to the attributes of the human nature, which He received into the unity of His divine person and made His own. He did this so that He might be able to suffer and be our High Priest for our reconciliation with God” (FC Ep VIII 14). (TLSB)

**2:9** *what God has prepared*. Probably not to be limited to either present or future blessing; both are involved (cf. vv. 7, 12). (CSB)

Miraculous acts of salvation in the OT, now surpassed by the mystery and miracles of Jesus’ works. *prepared*. God has already provided these great things. (TLSB)

It is significant that Paul adds that these are plans God has prepared “for those who *love* him” (1 Cor 2:9). We do not please him by displaying our knowledge and wisdom, but by showing him our love (cf. Rom 8:28). (CC p. 93)

**2:10** *revealed to us through the Spirit* – The Spirit reveals God’s mysteries through the Gospel, even through the words Paul writes. (TLSB)

What the human eye, ear, and heart failed to discern (2:9) God has revealed to us through the Spirit (2:10). The Greek word ἡμῖν (“to us”) is placed first in 2:10 for emphasis. Rack their brains as they might, the worldly wise could not understand God and his mysterious wisdom. To these people everything remained a closed book. But “to us” as Christian people, however lowly our status, God has bared his heart, granting us the high privilege of being made privy to his glorious plan of salvation. (CC pp. 100-101)

*Spirit searches everything*. Not in order to know them, for he knows all things. Instead he comprehends the depth of God’s nature and his plans of grace; so he is fully competent to make the revelation claimed here. (CSB)

There will always be mystery about God's person and nature, but we are given a glimpse of His ways through the cross. (TLSB)

**2:11 spirit** – The immaterial aspect of a person: mind, soul, and personality. (TLSB)

*knows a person's thoughts* – By comparison, only God's Spirit can understand God's mind. (TLSB)

Paul illustrates the Spirit's deep knowledge of God by an analogy from human experience. No one knows precisely what is going on inside another person's heart except the spirit of the person himself (2:11). In the same way, no one understands the mind of God except the Spirit of God himself. (CC p. 101)

**2:12 spirit of the world.** Cf. v. 6 ("wisdom of this age"); the spirit of human wisdom as alienated from God—the attitude of the sinful nature (Ro 8:6–7). (CSB)

The fashionable ideology of this fallen world. (TLSB)

τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ κόσμου—Compare the German expression "die Zeitgeist" ("the spirit of the time"). This secular "spirit" characterizes this finite age and stands in contrast to the divine "Spirit" given to Christians. The source of this worldly spirit is "the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now at work in the sons of disobedience" (Eph 2:2–3). (CC p. 97)

But when we became Christians through "the hearing of faith" (Gal 3:2) and through Baptism (Gal 3:27), what we received was not "the spirit of the world" (1 Cor 2:12), which is estranged from God and totally blind and deaf to the things of the Spirit. Puffed up with pride in its own cultural and philosophical accomplishments, its own religiosity and "spirituality"—indeed, its own popular personalities—this secular spirit is always trying to make the church conform to its own agenda rather than letting the church be conformed to the mind of Christ (2:16; cf. Rom 12:1–2). This spirit of secularism seeks to negate special revelation which has been graciously bestowed by God. (CC p. 101)

*Spirit who is from God* – In contrast, "the Spirit which is from God" (1 Cor 2:12) gives God's children a childlike appreciation of his rich grace and profound wisdom freely given us in the word of the cross. God's purpose was that we might be aware of "the things graciously given to us by God" (2:12). In the words "the things graciously given" (τὰ ... χαρισθέντα) we hear the word "grace" (χάρις). These things graciously given include grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:3), together with all the gifts of grace, the miraculous gifts bestowed on the congregation (1:4–7) and, in Paul's case, the grace which had called him to be an apostle and enabled him to labor so fruitfully (3:10; 15:10). As Lightfoot expresses it, the expression extends to all spiritual blessings and hopes conferred by the Gospel. (CC p. 102)

*freely given* – Provided by His grace. Only by the Spirit can we begin to understand His grace. "Through the Word He reveals and preaches, He illumines and enkindles hearts, so that they understand, accept, cling to, and persevere in the Word" (LC II 42). (TLSB)

**2:13 wisdom taught by the Spirit.** The message Paul proclaimed was expressed in words given by the Holy Spirit. Thus spiritual truth was aptly combined with fitting spiritual words. (CSB)

The Spirit revealed truths to the apostle and teaches us the meaning through the apostolic word He has inspired (cf 2Pt 1:21). (TLSB)

**2:14–3:4** This passage explains why many fail to apprehend true wisdom (2:9). It is because such wisdom is perceived by the spiritual (mature) Christian (2:14–16; cf. v. 6). The Corinthians, however, were

worldly (infant) believers (3:1–4), and the proof of their immaturity was their division over human leaders (3:3–4). (CSB)

**2:14** *natural person*. Described in Jude 19 as one who follows “mere natural instincts” (cf. Ro 8:9). The non-Christian is basically dominated by the merely physical, worldly or natural life. Because he does not possess the Holy Spirit, he is not equipped to receive appreciatively truth that comes from the Spirit. Such a person needs the new birth (Jn 3:1–8; Tit 3:5–6). (CSB)

One without God’s Spirit. (TLSB)

*because they are spiritually discerned* – Accessible only through faith. “They still do not know what His mind toward them is and cannot expect any love or blessing from Him. Therefore, they abide in eternal wrath and damnation. For they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, are not illumined and favored by any gifts of the Holy Spirit” (LC II 66). (TLSB)

The verb ἀνακρίνω (a compound of κρίνω, “to judge”) means to “question, examine,” to “call to account, discern.” The parallelism between οὐ δύναται γνῶναι (“he cannot understand”; literally, “he is not able to know”) and ὅτι πνευματικῶς ἀνακρίνεται suggests Paul is using ἀνακρίνω as a synonym of γινώσκω, “to know.” Thus ἀνακρίνω here means “to give a proper hearing, to discern.” (CC pp. 99-100)

**2:15** *spiritual*. Mature (v. 6). (CSB)

ὁ δὲ πνευματικός—The Christian “possesses the divine πνεῦμα; ... this enables him to penetrate the divine mysteries.” The great “mystery” is the Gospel itself (μυστήριον, 1 Cor 2:1, 7). All who believe the Gospel and are baptized into Christ receive the Spirit (e.g., Acts 2:38–39; 1 Cor 12:13) and so become “spiritual” people. However, in this earthly life the Christian experiences a battle. Christ exercises his lordship over the Christian through the Spirit, but the Christian’s old unspiritual and fleshly nature keeps trying to assert itself as his lord (Rom 7:6, 14, 25; 1 Cor 3:1–3, 16–17). As a result, even though Christians have the Spirit, at times they may act and think as “unspiritual” (2:14) or “fleshly” (3:1) people, rather than as “spiritual” people (2:13, 15; 3:1). (CC p. 100)

*spiritual person judges* – Refers to the spiritual assessment of every aspect of life, not necessarily condemnation. (TLSB)

His judgment is informed by the Word and Spirit of God. The Word and Spirit go together; the way to discern whether a person is in accord with the Spirit is by whether he is in accord with God’s Word, through which the Spirit works. However, Paul writes that the spiritual person himself “is discerned by no one” (2:15). In this context, “no one” probably means no natural, Spirit-less man, no one who is purely “fleshly” (1 Cor 3:1, 3) and purely “human” (3:3, 4), that is, an unbeliever, unbaptized, and not indwelt by the Holy Spirit. To such a person, the Christian remains an enigma; the non-Christian cannot make him out or comprehend the reason for his words and actions. (CC p. 103-104)

*not subject to any man’s judgment*. One who does not have the Spirit is not qualified to judge the spiritual person. Thus believers are not rightfully subject to the opinions of unbelievers. (CSB)

No “natural person” (v 14) can make spiritual judgments about a Christian. (TLSB)

**2:16** *as to instruct him* – The Lord did not need human aid when He created the world. (TLSB)

*mind of Christ* – Cf Mt 11:27. (TLSB)

However, in his gracious condescension he has poured out his Spirit to create spiritual people who can discern and trust his plan. Consequently, they no longer see things from a worldly point of view (2 Cor 5:16); they are in the privileged position of knowing the mind of the Lord, for they have “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). But lest this privilege tempt them to become puffed up, they should remember that Christ is the crucified one, and they, like Paul, should determine to know only Christ crucified (1 Cor 2:2). As one commentator observes, “to have the mind of the Lord is to participate in the pattern of the cross (cf. Phil. 2:1–11).” (CC p. 104)

Philippians 2:5, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”

**2:6–16** The message of the cross is simple, but the spiritual wisdom that comes with it touches every area of life and faith. In view of this, we see unbelievers with new compassion, as people with no true spiritual comprehension. The Holy Spirit grants such understanding only through the Gospel. • Enlighten us with spiritual insight, Holy Spirit. Strengthen us to share Your Word. Amen. (TLSB)