

# WHEN THE GOSPEL COMES TO TOWN

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*By the Book*™ A Chapter by  
Chapter Bible Study Series  
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## Let's Begin

*Corinth blossomed with artistic beauty. Famous paintings, elaborate architecture, and sophisticated sculptures filled the ancient city. Known for academic excellence, they took pride in their academies. But when we read the letters of the Apostle Paul to Corinth, mention of the city's fineries are conspicuously absent.*

*In fact, Paul specifically avoided "adding culture" to Corinth. Instead, he came preaching a counter-cultural Gospel which offered a heavenly alternative to Corinth's worldly environment. Coming as no sight-seer, Paul came as a soul-winner! He offered no new philosophy to debate but a message to declare. Without hesitation, Paul proclaimed: "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1:21b).*

*Today, our lesson focuses on what happens when the Gospel comes to your town. As we begin our study of 1 Corinthians 2, let's follow the outline below:*

- I. When the Gospel is Declared (vv. 1-5)**
- II. When the Gospel is Discerned (vv. 6-13)**
- III. When the Gospel is Declined (vv. 14-16)**

## I. When the Gospel is Declared (vv. 1-5)

Someone once said of preaching, "Hell fears it but Heaven ordains it." We could add, but earth requires it. Paul came preaching the Gospel. In the market, where buyers and sellers negotiate their deals, Paul stood proclaiming God's redemptive plan. In the synagogue the apostle unapologetically defended Jesus as the coming Messiah. A more appropriate picture of the model preacher cannot be found elsewhere.

First, Paul reveals the passion of a Gospel preacher. Note his words, "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling" (vv. 1-3). Paul's heart burned with a passion to preach. Later in this letter, Paul shouted out, "for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!" (9:16).

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Paul preached the Gospel *simply*. As we note from the verses above, Paul avoided both "excellency" of speech or "wisdom." The apostle is not suggesting the preacher declare nonsense in an inferior manner. To the contrary, every Gospel preacher must do what he can to communicate the message of Jesus Christ to the best of his gifts and abilities. Instead, Paul is denying he focused either on eloquence or oratory performance. Indeed it is quite possible to speak eloquently but have absolutely nothing to say! Paul wanted no part of speaking only to "tickle ears" (cp. 2 Tim. 4:3-4). His passion was to make the message understandable. A similar passion must fill the hearts of those who declare the Gospel in our day.

Paul also preached the Gospel *exclusively*. He clearly denied preaching anything other than "Jesus Christ, and him crucified." Two factors follow from Paul's focus exclusively on the Gospel. First, he preached the *Person* of Christ. His goal was singularly to make Jesus known. Why can't that be the non-negotiable



goal of the modern church—at all costs, to make Jesus known? To another church Paul loved, he said the same thing in slightly different way, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).

In addition, Paul preached the *work* of Christ. Not only is it Jesus that Paul preached, but also what Jesus did. Jesus Christ was crucified for our sins and raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25). Christ’s death was God’s goal through the eternal ages. And, Paul committed to declare His death exclusively. Why? Because the Gospel brings conversion to sinners, consecration to saints, and comfort to the suffering.

Not only did Paul preach *simply* and *exclusively*, but he also preached *humbly*. Recall Paul’s words in verse 3, “And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.” He knew the message would not be well received. Yet, God gave him a vision to preach at Corinth. And, even though he was physically, emotionally and mentally wasted, he followed the Lord’s direction in his life. The flame of Paul’s passion never smoldered out.

*Second, Paul reveals the power of a Gospel preacher.* Believe it or not, there are dangers in presenting the Gospel. Paul writes, “And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (v. 4). One danger is attempting to present the Gospel with *human persuasion*. Paul cautions about the “enticing words of man’s wisdom.”

Corinth was filled with orators who could magnetically attract listeners, keeping them interested through their enticing rhetoric. Against such human innovation, Paul called for “demonstration of the Spirit and of power.” Declaring the Gospel in the power of God’s Spirit liberates the message to spiritually connect to the hearer. The Holy Spirit works on the raw Word of God to germinate the truth of God in a person’s heart.

*Third, Paul reveals the purpose of the Gospel preacher.* John Wesley once said to a group of preachers, “You have only one thing to do—win souls!” Wesley was only repeating what Paul said at Corinth, “That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God” (v. 5). The only way to win souls is to preach in the power of God’s Spirit. If we do, real faith will be born in the power of God, not an artificial faith manufactured by the wisdom of men.

Hence, Paul referenced a *saving faith*. But he also referred to a *steadfast faith*. Christ is preached that believers might be strong, immovable in the Lord’s work (cp. 15:18; 16:13).

### Reflection Connection

*Do you think there has been a change in preaching today? Why or why not? What is the most significant aspect of preaching the Gospel? Be specific.*

*The Holy Spirit works on the raw Word of God to germinate the truth of God in a person’s heart.*



## II. When the Gospel is Discerned (vv. 6-13)

The church at Corinth divided because they were enamored with human wisdom, failing to see the simplicity of God's wisdom. Some even accept the mistaken notion that the Christian faith is anti-intellectual. Anticipating the charge, the Apostle Paul writes, "Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought" (v. 6).

Two truths we must keep in mind as we consider God's wisdom. First, God's wisdom remains concealed from this age. Human wisdom dominates but always leads to destruction. Second, God's wisdom is conveyed by the Holy Spirit. God's wisdom is spiritual in nature. With this in mind, let's explore how God's wisdom in the Gospel is discerned.

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nature.*

*First, we discern the Gospel by spiritual revelation.* Paul writes, "But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God" (vv. 9-10). God has the prerogative to either conceal Himself or reveal Himself. Eternal thanks goes to Him for revealing Himself! Without His revelation, we could not know Him. Why? One reason is the limits of *human understanding*. Paul denies our physical senses can comprehend the greatness of God. His majesty is beyond our observational powers, our informational skills, and our mental comprehension.

Because we are limited, there must be *revelation* of the Holy Spirit (v. 10). The Spirit is the One Who searches the heart (cp. Rom. 8:27; Rev. 2:23). As we search the Scriptures, He reveals God to us (John 5:39; 7:52). This remains the reason why some people can be highly intelligent in some fields of interest but absolutely blind to the things of God.

*Second, we discern the Gospel by spiritual illumination.* God reveals Himself to us by the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the Holy Spirit moves upon our hearts and minds to understand the things God reveals. Notice how Paul explains it, "For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God" (vv. 11-12). Note Paul's *analogy* (v. 11). The only one who really knows man is man himself, through his inner thoughts, feelings, and motives. The same may be said about God. Only the Spirit of God knows the mind of God. Hence, the Holy Spirit must illumine my understanding concerning the things of God.

Next, observe Paul's application (v. 12). As we have received the Spirit of God, we have His illumination. Absent the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, no one could get the deeper meaning from God's Word (cp. John 14:26; 16:13;

### Reflection Connection

*Reflect on some passages of Scriptures which always seem to baffle you. Have you ever prayed for the Holy Spirit to illuminate your heart? Explain.*



1 John 2:27). Intellectuals are noticeably baffled by this (cp. Matt. 16:17). Nevertheless, Christians must continually ask the Holy Spirit to illumine the Word He has revealed.

*Finally, we discern the Gospel by spiritual inspiration.* Note Paul's words: "Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual" (v. 13). Revelation and illumination revolve around a book which is a result of spiritual inspiration—the Bible. God's Word—our Bible—is fully inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). Spiritual inspiration may be described as *verbal*. That is, the very words of the Scripture are inspired. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit inspired the Bible *systematically*. Paul's phrase "comparing spiritual things with spiritual" is indicative of harmony. No part of the Bible contradicts another part. Scripture sheds light on Scripture.

### III. When the Gospel is Declined (vv. 14-16)

As the Gospel is declared, the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to discern its deeper meaning. No doctrine can be known apart from the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Even so, the Scripture the Holy Spirit reveals to us can be side-stepped and even dismissed. In other words, the Bible's message—God's wisdom—can be declined. Hear the words of Paul, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? but we have the mind of Christ" (vv. 14-16).

Paul gives three categories of listeners in this section of Scripture: natural (v.14), spiritual (vv. 15-16), and carnal (3:1-4). For our purposes, we will focus more closely on the first two. Comments on the third will be brief since we will deal with it more fully in chapter three.

The first listener is the *natural* listener. According to Scripture, there are only two kinds of people in the world—saved and unsaved. The natural listener is an unsaved person. He or she has never met Christ. Unregenerate is an apt description. And, even though the person may be noticeably refined, highly intellectual, morally sharpened, or extraordinarily gifted, he or she nevertheless is conceived in sin, shaped in iniquity, and totally undone before God. Here stands the natural listener.

Paul instructs us— the natural listener has no *appreciation* of spiritual things. He "receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him." In fact, he cannot even know them. It never seriously enters his mind to serve God. Spiritual Christianity upsets this person. He or she becomes

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### Reflection Connection

*Reflect for a moment concerning your personal attitude toward spiritual realities. What listening category would you consider yourself fitting? Be very honest with yourself.*

### Golden Greek Nugget

Paul denied his message came to the Corinthians through the “enticing words of man’s wisdom” (v. 4). The term translated “enticing” is the Greek word *peithos*, a word found nowhere else in the New Testament. It basically means “persuasion.” In the first century, there was a Greek goddess whose name was Peitho, the goddess of persuasion. Her mythic abilities lie in magnetically persuading those who listened to her. Origen (the early church father) was convinced Paul alluded to the goddess in this passage. If he is correct, Paul’s meaning for the Corinthians is clear: he came not with either human ability or the persuasive charisma of their “gods.” Instead he came in the power of the one and true living God.

irritated and uncomfortable when deeply spiritual matters are discussed. Indeed it never dawns upon them exactly why. The spiritual is lifeless, dull, and void of all interest.

Hence, there is no *apprehension* of the spiritual. No capacity for knowledge of God exists. God makes no sense to the natural listener. Missing deep down within is a spiritual antenna. Why? Something within this man or woman is dead. Paul makes it clear the natural man is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1).

The second listener Paul mentions is the *spiritual* listener. Paul describes this person as one who “judgeth all things” and even possessing the “mind of Christ.” Contrary to the *natural* man which is an *unsaved* man, the *spiritual* man is a *saved* man. This person is birthed from above (cp. John 3:1-6). The old flesh no longer dominates. Indeed he or she has become a brand new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), created a masterpiece for good works (Eph. 2:10). The Holy Spirit not only abides in this person’s life, but He also presides over this person’s life.

Furthermore, the spiritual person is capable of discernment. He or she possesses a higher insight into the meaning of things. Spiritual matters pique the person’s mind, always drawing the spiritual person to check out the things of God. And, this capacity for God is not static, but dynamic. His or her capacity for God grows daily (Col. 1:9). The thinking of the spiritual person is so united to Christ, his or her thinking is the thinking of Christ. In fact, the spiritual person allows every thought to be captivated by the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). People cannot figure the spiritual person out. The Spirit-controlled life ever stands as an enigma to those not possessing the Spirit.

The third listener is the *carnal* listener (3:1-4). Paul shocks the Corinthians with the category of the *carnal* listener, “And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ” (3:1). While the carnal person is a saved person, in many respects, he or she acts similarly to an *unsaved* person. In essence, the carnal person is a spiritual freak, a hypocritical attempt to live a double life. It is certainly possible some people who are church members are nonetheless unregenerate. Similarly, it is just as possible one would not know a “carnal” person is a saved person. Why? Mostly, it would be due to his or her *fleshly* control rather than *spiritual* control. The carnal person lives by the wit of the old nature, declining much if not most of the godly wisdom available by spiritual illumination. In essence, the carnal person lives a self-enthroned life.

### Wrap Up

*While Gospel wisdom is declared by faithful witnesses today, declaring wisdom is not enough. People must respond to what is declared. Hence, the Holy Spirit’s role is to illumine what He has inspired—the Word of God. Without His illumination, our hearts cannot receive Divine truth. With His illumination, however, we are enabled to decide for Christ or dismiss His revelation to us. What is your response to God’s revealed Word?*

