

The Problem with Knowledge

I Corinthians 1 | Week One | Leader's Guide

This Week

This first session sets the stage for the rest of the study. You'll get to do more "summarizing" of intro & select passages this week in order to insure that you cover the highlighted passage. However, this will change in the weeks that follow. This session is all about laying out the problems Paul is attempting to address.

The Big Idea

As scholars, we need to see our studies through the Gospel lens of a creator God extending redemptive grace to a lost world. This perspective is the source of true wisdom and keeps our knowledge from being a point of pride or division in the Church

Looking at the Text

Ask someone to read I Corinthians 1:1-3 - *Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, ²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul is opening his letter in a fairly standard format. It was customary to begin a letter like this by introducing the author and addressing the recipients. Before we dig into the letter itself, we need to understand the various characters at work – namely the author and the recipients. ASK: **What comes to mind when you think of Corinth??**

Who are the Corinthians?

Corinth stood as a beacon of industry and culture.

- established as an influential city until its destruction by the Roman government in 146 B.C, reestablished by Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.
- became the foremost commercial center in southern Greece, great wealth
- became a melting pot of ideas, known for its many religious rites and vices.
- Corinthian culture prized wisdom and knowledge.
- became known for sexual exploitation. Plato often used the term "Corinthian girl" as a euphemism for a prostitute.

Who is Paul?

Paul is an apostle of Jesus. Paul's apostolic credentials are based on his experience on the road to Damascus when he encountered the risen Christ. He was a Pharisee, a scholar of the Jewish Law, trained by one of the most respected Jewish leaders in history. But after receiving Christ God made him the "apostle to the Gentiles" a people group having very little understanding of the true God.

- 1 | The Problem with Knowledge
- 2 | Wisdom of Man & Power of God
- 3 | Servanthood & Stewardship
- 4 | Sex, Holiness, and Worship
- 5 | Singleness, Marriage, and Calling
- 6 | Knowledge, Idolatry, & Surrender
- 7 | The Anatomy of an Idol
- 8 | All in the Family
- 9 | It's All About Love
- 10 | Spiritual Gifts & The Church
- 11 | The Resurrection & The End

Get Started

Open up the session by asking someone to pray. This will help break the ice and get everyone in the practice of listening to each other.

Which Verses Should I Emphasize the Most?

Make sure you address vs. 20-25 well as this is one of the most applicable passages for graduate students. Also, remember to address all questions marked with an asterisk. The rest are optional.

Don't Forget

Before you start calling on people to read Scripture or pray, make sure the individual you are calling on is comfortable with the task. You never want to put someone on the spot!

All provided Scripture quotations are in the English Standard Version.

It is with this background of wealth, a celebration of knowledge, and not a small hint of sexual immorality that Paul writes to call out his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

1. *The language Paul uses to describe his recipients makes it clear he is specifically talking to Christians. Why is this an important distinction to make?

Paul will expect them to have an understanding of who Jesus is and he will approach them as close friends or brothers, rather than as non-Christians with a minimal understanding of God. He will give thanks for them, acknowledge their position in Christ, their gifts and the promise of perseverance because He is faithful (4-9). Then he begins the rebuke:

Summarize verses 10-12 by saying: Paul describes a major problem in the Corinthian church: divisions according to one of four men they follow and consider their spiritual leaders. This becomes destructive as they begin to see one individual's knowledge and teaching more valuable or spiritual than the next guy's understanding. In the same way the Corinthian church was divided, we often lift up Christian celebrities who preach a certain way thus creating factions around them.

Summarize verses 13-17 saying: *Is Christ divided? No! He died to bring unity through His death. Neither leaders nor baptism should cause divisions. Paul's calling was to simply preach the gospel, not with words of eloquent wisdom, but redeeming power.*

Ask someone to read verses **18-19**: this begins an extensive discussion concerning the wisdom of man contrasted with the wisdom of God. Ask, What role does the Cross play as a foundation for wisdom?

Ask someone to read verses 20-25 - *Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*

What causes Paul to say the wisdom of the world is foolish? What's missing? How does a secular scholar contribute to our body of knowledge and when does it not?

When trying to describe the origins of the universe, scientific mysteries or the source for meaning in life, the secular scholar is at a disadvantage. Doing research apart from seeing God as a loving Creator/Redeemer misses His intent and involvement in designing a universe for His glory and our pleasure. The secular scholar can accurately analyze the mechanics of the world because it has design and order. It is foolishness when one attempts to explain how and why MAN inhabits such a complex universe.

What makes the cross a stumbling block? Why does Paul preach Christ crucified?

The simplicity of the message of the cross reduces our wisdom, effort and achievement as meaningless and powerless to save. It levels the playing field for all to accept the grace and redemption offered, regardless of brilliance or status. Paul's desire is to never detract from the centrality of Christ and His cross, even though he achieved academics accolades in his day and could have been eloquent in the midst of any scholars. He filtered his academic insights through the work of Christ, gaining an edge among peers with the strength of God's wisdom.

Teaching This

This background information is very important to cover as it gives context to Paul's writing and the main points he is trying to make. We have purposely included a wealth of information here. Try to avoid reading this aloud to the group. Rather, commit the main points to memory and very casually explain this to your participants, going into as little or as much detail as you decide is necessary.

Illustrate It

Have you ever been so concerned for a friend that you had to sit him or her down and speak some difficult truth into his or her life? To better illustrate Paul's tone, share a little bit about that experience – how you approached your friend and how the words were received.

How is your discipline perspective different when seen through the gospel lens?

God has designed the universe to be studied by all, for His glory. The place of man in the world and in relation to his global community needs to incorporate the reality of the FALL and the need for REDEMPTION. The study of science or humanities is vastly different from our secular colleagues when we see a Person, a Plan and a Purpose behind the world as we know it.

Read the quote by Piper in the margin of the participant discussion guide and ask how the participants have seen the Glory of God in their studies this week

Wrapping Up

In verses 26-31, Paul ends this passage with a sense of encouragement to those who don't consider themselves the smartest ones in the room.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

In light of this passage, how does God view the uneducated? What about those who define themselves by their knowledge?

These believers may not have seen themselves as elite thinkers. That's OK. The heart of God's wisdom is found in Christ. What offends human wisdom about the cross is that it humbles man and exalts the grace of God. Those who DO call themselves scholars need to recognize that knowledge is not a basis to boast. They too need to look to the grace of God, humbled and dependent, for salvation and wisdom. Jesus says in Luke 10:21 that God reveals saving truth to children and hides it from the wise.

Closing

Close the session by tying everything together and reiterating the big idea with this illustration: Alignment to the **Gospel Lens** is critical for the process of becoming a Christian scholar, loving God with Heart, Soul & Mind. John Piper says there are 2 ways to magnify: a telescope that causes us to see the expanse as it really is (God's handiwork displaying His glory), or a microscope that makes what is small look bigger than it is. The world sees man as center of a naturalistic, mechanistic universe, forgetting God (foolishness). Our Gospel lens places Jesus at the center as creator God, redeemer, and source of truth. (Jn 14:6)

Remember

As your discussion comes to a close, end the session in prayer.