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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

# THE FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS: AN EXPANDED PARAPHRASE

## I. PROLOGUE (Ch. 1: 1-9)

### (a) *Salutation* (Ch. 1: 1-3)

**T**O the Church of God established at Corinth, to those who have been consecrated in Christ Jesus and called by God to be holy men and women, along with everyone everywhere who calls on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord as well as ours—this letter comes from Paul, apostle of Christ Jesus by divine vocation (since God has so willed), and from Sosthenes our brother. Grace and peace be yours, from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

### (b) *Thanksgiving* (Ch. 1: 4-9)

I always give thanks to God on your behalf, because of His grace which has been given to you in Christ Jesus. In Him you have been enriched with everything, with all utterance and all knowledge. The witness of Christ has been amply confirmed among you, so that you have no lack of any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, and He will go on confirming you to the end, and then you will be without reproach in the day of our Lord Jesus. It was a faithful God indeed who called you into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

## II. PAUL DEALS WITH THE REPORT RECEIVED FROM CHLOE'S HOUSEHOLD (Ch. 1: 10-4; 21)

### (a) *Party-strife and pretensions to wisdom* (Ch. 1: 10-4; 5)

Now, my brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ I entreat you to speak with one voice. Don't let there be any divisions among you, but be united in the same mind and the same judgment. You see, my brothers. Chloe's people have informed me that there are dissensions among you. I mean, each of you is claiming someone as a party-leader. Some say, "I belong to Paul"; others, "I follow Apollos"; others say, "I am Peter's man"; and others again, "I belong to Christ"—as though Christ had been divided up so as to belong to one party instead of to you all! Tell me: was Paul crucified for you? Was it into Paul's name that you were baptized? Thank God, I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius. Thank God, I say, because nobody can pretend that it was

into my name that you were baptized. Oh yes, I baptized the Stephanas family too; apart from them, I do not think I baptized anyone else. It was not to baptize that Christ commissioned me, but to preach His good news.

And moreover, when He commissioned me to preach His good news, He did not tell me to use the eloquence of the schools. Such eloquence would rob the cross of Christ of its inherent power. The message of the cross is sheer folly to those who are on the way to perdition; but to those who tread salvation's road it is God's own power. Remember the scripture:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;  
I will do away with the discernment of the discerning".<sup>1</sup>

"Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe?"<sup>2</sup> Where is the debater of the present world-order? Has God not turned the world's wisdom into folly? According to God's overruling wisdom, the world with all its wisdom never attained to the knowledge of God. Then God resolved to bring men to that knowledge by what the world counted folly; He has used the gospel message to save those who believe it. The Jews demand a sign and the Greeks seek for wisdom, but the message we proclaim is a crucified Messiah. To Jews that message is a scandal, to Gentiles it is sheer folly, but to those whom God has called as His people, Jews and Greeks alike, the Christ whom we proclaim is God's power and God's wisdom. You see, God's "folly" is wiser than men's wisdom; God's "weakness" is stronger than men's power.

Look at your own community, those who have responded to God's call. There are not many wise people by ordinary reckoning, not many in places of authority, not many of noble birth. No; but God has chosen the foolish things (in the world's estimation) to confound the wise; God has chosen the weak things (by the world's standards) to confound the strong things; He has chosen the ignoble and despised things (by the world's reckoning), things that are mere nothings, to destroy the well-established things—so that no one should have anything to boast about in His presence. And in Christ Jesus you are God's children—in Christ Jesus, whom God has made our true wisdom, a wisdom that embraces righteousness, consecration, and redemption. Thus the scripture is fulfilled which says: "Let him who boasts make his boast in the Lord".<sup>3</sup>

Take myself, for example. When I first came to you, my brothers, I did not come and proclaim God's testimony to you

<sup>1</sup> Isa. 29:14.

<sup>2</sup> Isa. 19:12; 33:18.

<sup>3</sup> Jer. 9:24.

with any excellence of speech or wisdom. I had made up my mind to exclude everything else from my knowledge while I was among you, except Jesus Christ—and the crucified Jesus Christ at that. For my part, I came to you in weakness, in fear, in great trembling; and my message, my proclamation, was not couched in persuasive words of wisdom. None the less, it was attended by the powerful conviction produced by the Spirit, and this was in order that your faith might not rest in human wisdom but in God's power.

All the same, we do have a message of wisdom for those who have been "initiated"; but it is no wisdom of the present world-order or of its ruling powers, who are under sentence of destruction. The wisdom which we have to speak of is God's wisdom, hitherto concealed, but now imparted by revelation, the wisdom which He ordained long ages ago with a view to the glory which would one day be ours. None of the ruling powers of the present world-order know anything of this wisdom; had they known it, they would never have crucified our glorious Lord. (This is what the scripture means when it says:

"What eye never saw and ear never heard;

What never entered the heart of man —

What God has prepared for those who love Him.<sup>4</sup>)

But God has revealed this wisdom to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches out everything, even the depths of the divine counsel. In human experience is it not the human spirit which is within a man that knows the things that pertain to man? In the same way no man knows the things that pertain to God apart from the Spirit of God. And the spirit which we have received is not the spirit of the world but the Spirit of God, that we may know the things which God by His grace has bestowed upon us. So, when we speak of these things, we do not use words taught us by human wisdom, but words taught us by the Spirit, giving a spiritual form to spiritual truth. The unspiritual man cannot take in the things which the Spirit of God imparts; they are folly to his way of thinking, and he is unable to apprehend them because they are assessed by the spiritual faculty. But the spiritual man is able to assess everything, while he himself is subject to no one's assessment. For "who has come to know the Lord's mind, so as to give Him instruction?"<sup>5</sup> But we — we who have received the Spirit of God—possess the mind of Christ.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Isa. 64:4. Origen says the quotation is taken from the *Apocalypse of Elijah*—an opinion rejected by Jerome.

<sup>5</sup> Isa. 40: 13.

Now, my brothers, the reason why I have not imparted these spiritual truths to you is that I was unable to address you as spiritual men. I had to treat you as people not yet fully liberated from the earthly order, as infants in the Christian life. I gave you milk to drink instead of solid food to eat, for you were not yet able to digest solid food. And indeed you are still unable to digest it, for you are still obviously under the influence of the earthly order. What do I mean by that? I mean this: where there is jealousy and party-strife among you, are you not living by earthly standards, behaving like unregenerate men? When one says "I belong to Paul" and another says "Apollos is my leader", are you not acting like ordinary men? Who is Apollos? Who is Paul? They are servants of the Lord, who led you to faith in Him, in accordance with the ability which He gave to each of them. I planted the seed and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow. It is not the man who planted it who is important, nor yet the one who watered it, but God, who made it grow. He who plants and he who waters are partners in one enterprise, and each will receive his proper reward for the work he has done. Apollos and I are fellow-workmen in the service of God; you are God's field, or if you like, God's building.

If you think of yourselves as God's building, then I am like a skilled master-builder who laid the foundation according to the grace which God gave me. Now someone else builds on that foundation. But let each one take care how he builds on it. As regards the foundation itself no question arises: no one can lay any other foundation than that which has been laid, for Jesus Christ is the one foundation. But whatever is built on this foundation—whether it be gold, silver, costly stones, or wood, hay and stubble—each man's work will be seen for what it is. The coming day will bring it to light, for it will be revealed by the application of fire; the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If the work which he has built on the foundation survives the fiery test, he will receive his reward. If any one's work is burnt up, the loss will be his; he himself will escape, but it will be a bare escape through fire.

Do you not know that you constitute the sanctuary of God, in which the Spirit of God has His abode? If any one brings ruin to God's sanctuary, God will bring ruin on him. God's sanctuary is holy, and you are that sanctuary.

Don't let any one deceive himself. If any of you thinks himself wise by the reckoning of this world-order, then let him become

a fool by that reckoning, so that he may become wise in the true sense of the term. For the world's wisdom is folly in God's estimation. The scripture says: "He catches the wise in their cunning".<sup>6</sup> And again: "The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, and counts them foolish".<sup>7</sup>

So then, don't let any one make his boast in men. For everything is yours, Paul, Apollos, Peter; the world, life or death; the present things or things to come—they all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. So far as Apollos and I are concerned, let us be regarded as servants of Christ, stewards of God, charged with making known His revelation. Here, too, let it be remembered that what is looked for in a steward is faithfulness to his stewardship. Now to me it is a matter of no importance that I should have my faithfulness assessed by you, or indeed by any human tribunal. Why, I do not even pass judgment on myself. I have a perfectly clear conscience in the matter, but that is not the ground of my justification. No, the only one who can pass judgment on me is the Lord. So then, do not pass any premature judgment; wait until the Lord comes, for He will bring to light the hidden motives which none can see just now, and unveil the inner counsels of the heart. And then each man will receive his proper commendation from God.

*(b) The Apostles and their Converts (Ch. 4: 6-21)*

Now, my brothers, I have spoken of Apollos and myself in this connection, applying the general principles to our particular case. I have done this for your sakes, in order that you may learn a lesson from us<sup>8</sup> and not indulge in inflated claims on behalf of the one as against the other.

Tell me this, my friend: who gives you any superiority over others? What have you got that you did not first receive? If you admit that you received it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

You Corinthians think you have already taken all the food you need; you have acquired spiritual wealth already; you have attained royal rank without us. I wish you had indeed attained royal rank, for then we should have attained it along with you. But we do not look as if we had, do we? It seems to me that God

<sup>6</sup> Job 5: 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ps. 94: 11.

<sup>8</sup> Taking the enigmatic Τὸ μὴ ὑπὲρ α γέγραπται as originally a marginal gloss in a copy from which μὴ had been accidentally omitted after ἴνα in the last clause of v. 6. The gloss means: "The μὴ is written above α " (i.e., above the final letter of ἴνα).

has exhibited us who are apostles as the lowest of men, doomed to death, in the arena where we are a spectacle to the world, to angels and men alike. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are honoured, but we are dishonoured. To this very hour we continue to endure hunger, thirst and nakedness; we are knocked about and treated as vagabonds. We toil hard, earning our livelihood with our own hands. When we are insulted we answer with words of blessing; when we are persecuted we bear it patiently; when we are given an evil reputation we counter it with a conciliatory reply. We have become like the refuse of the world, the offscouring of the universe, and so we remain to this day.

Now, I do not wish to make you feel ashamed when I write this; I am instructing you, because you are my own dear children. You may have thousands of tutors in the Christian life, but you have not many fathers. In Christ Jesus it is I who am your father, through the gospel which I brought to you. So, let me entreat you, take me for your example.

This is the very reason why I am sending Timothy to you. He is my dear and trusty son in the Lord, and he will remind you of my manner of life as a Christian, the manner of life which I inculcate in every church. Some of you have been using inflated language, as though I were not coming to you. But make no mistake: I will come to you soon, God willing; and then I shall learn what these inflated people are really worth, not just what they say. For the kingdom of God does not come with outward talk but with inward power. Well, what is your choice? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a gentle spirit?

*(To be continued)*