
THE CHRISTIAN PROSPECT

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Our Hopes for This Work

The development of biblical Christianity in an individual or a congregation is, by necessity, a process of lifelong growth. Each of us who has been called has been called to leave behind the imperfections of our flesh, with all its weakness and folly. In our natural, unaided state, not one of us could have known the power and wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 2:6-16). Thus, although we may grow to experience great heights of spiritual wisdom and maturity before we die, we must always concede that no student or scholar of the Word of God has any meaningful advantage over another – all that we have is what God has given us, and not one of us can reach beyond what has been written (1 Corinthians 4:6-7).

In ancient times, God selected apostles and prophets to reveal the words recorded in Scripture for the benefit of every Christian. Those words, propagated since the completion of the Scriptures by the efforts of faithful evangelists, elders, and teachers, are designed to accomplish spiritual growth in the whole body of Christ. When this growth is completed, the body will be one in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. The body will become like its head – Christ – in all things (Ephesians 4:11-16). The work of God's ministers is targeted toward this end, but it necessarily *precedes* the unity and perfection of the body. Since we begin our Christian lives in immaturity and incompleteness, our growth must come before our maturity, and we must pass every stage of incompleteness before we may be considered complete.

With these facts in view, we conclude that the defining feature of a faithful Christian is *growth*. Not one of us begins our new life in Christ with perfection, nor can we call ourselves perfect in our present state, if we assess ourselves honestly. Rather, we must confess with the apostle Paul that we

have not already attained the resurrection from the dead, nor are we already perfected. Rather, we reach forward to those things which are ahead, and we press toward the goal for the prize (Philippians 3:12-14). We must hold to the knowledge and maturity that we have attained thus far, for what we have received we have received from God. We cannot, however, claim perfection, for if we do, we exempt ourselves from the power and influence of God, and we declare our equality with Christ (not as though we were born equal, but as if we have finished our work on earth since our conversion). We must continue to learn, and we must continue to grow, otherwise we forsake the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Built on these principles, this journal aims to facilitate an open and cooperative discussion of the Word of God. We hold that every theme developed in Scripture is of paramount importance for our education as children of God, therefore, our interest is not to develop a thorough expression of a limited number of themes. Rather, our hope is that this journal will become a *system* or *medium* through which any subject that has a bearing on the content, interpretation, and application of the Word of God can be openly addressed. Everything we learn from the Scriptures, no matter where we start from, will bring us one step closer to the fullness and perfection of Christ.

To this end, the following principles will be observed by the editor of this journal:

1. **No preference will be given to any one theme to the exclusion of another.** We will not take it upon ourselves to judge what in God's Word is necessary, and which parts are inconsequential. We hold that a fuller understanding of every part of Scripture will contribute to our spiritual growth and knowledge.
2. **No article published, the present essay included, will be considered as above criticism.** God's Word shall be the only standard of truth used in these pages. As we learn, we will inevitably recognize numerous deficiencies in our own knowledge

and maturity. We must allow ourselves to grow, and to leave behind our imperfections.

3. **No author shall be judged or excluded from this journal on the basis of any disagreement.** No one of us is perfect, and we must give one another and ourselves the space to grow. Any one of us may be wrong – even confidently wrong – about any theme found in Scripture, which we may only realize through study and honest conversation. Thus, we will not and cannot demand perfection from any author or from ourselves as editors and publishers.
4. **Criticism of any article must be directed at the content of the argument or the evidences and presuppositions that stand behind it.** No room will be found in this journal for emotional appeals or personal attacks against any author. When a response to any article seems profitable or necessary, we encourage the use of thoughtful questions directed toward the original author to maintain a friendly and constructive tone in every exchange.
5. **Any author may publish in total anonymity.** We recognize that fear of retribution and personal grudges may cause some to be reluctant to address certain subjects and questions. To enable such sensitive discussions, we offer every author the option to publish any question or essay anonymously.

We hope to maintain a regular publication schedule on or near the first of every month. There will be no set length for each issue. We may defer some submissions to the next month if any single issue much exceeds 20,000 words. This is to keep each issue at a manageable and approachable length.

We welcome submissions of all types and lengths – from a question consisting of a single sentence all the way to an essay of several thousand words. As a general rule, longer essays may be broken into multiple parts across several months. We will do our best to make these breaks at logical points that respect natural divisions in the original essay.

It is our hope and our prayer that this journal will be a blessing and encouragement for all who read it and participate in each discussion. All that we say and do as a part of this project is open to both input and criticism. May God use our efforts here and elsewhere to accomplish His purpose in the world and in our lives, and may we grow together in the knowledge and unity of our Savior.

— Matthew Shaffer

The Grace of God, Part 1

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9, NKJV)

The New Testament Scriptures make it plain that we can only be saved by the grace of God. That much is clear. However, the many interpreters of God’s Word throughout history have found themselves at odds as to what, exactly, that means. What is grace? Who experiences it? If salvation depends entirely upon God’s decision to apply His grace, why isn’t everyone saved? How and why does He differentiate between who He will save and who He will allow to perish?

The importance of these questions is self-evident, for the answers affect our faith and trust in God. Can we know for sure that He will reward us if we devote our whole selves to Him? In this series of essays, we aim to demonstrate that we can trust God because His Word has revealed how and why He distributes His grace. Our proposition may be summarized as follows:

God withholds no measure of grace (specifically the forgiveness of sins)
that is helpful to accomplish His purpose in humanity.

God has a plan for humankind, and the grace that He demonstrates through the redemption we find in His Son is designed to accomplish that plan. Thus, when we trace God’s plan through history, we should see that His

interventions in human affairs always work toward the accomplishment of that goal. We hope to explore several examples to demonstrate this point, but this first essay will focus on a more foundational question: what is God's purpose for humankind?

We find the first statement of this purpose in the first chapter of Genesis:

"Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" (Genesis 1:26-28, NKJV)

This passage, which we understand to be the creation and commission of humankind into God's service, lists three commands: 1) fill the earth, 2) subdue it, and 3) have dominion over creation. Thus, our purpose is originally described as a regnal one. We do not yet see what the *fulfilled* purpose would look like, since Adam and Eve sinned before they finished their work, but something of God's intention is revealed in these words. Some thousands of years later, David, a prophet, reflected on this information in the eighth psalm:

*"When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,
What is man that You are mindful of him,
And the son of man that You visit him?
For You have made him a little lower than the angels,
And You have crowned him with glory and honor.*

*You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet."* (Psalm 8:3-6, NKJV)

And a thousand years later, the same line of thought is picked up in the second chapter of Hebrews, where the author responded directly to David's verse in the eighth psalm:

For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. (Hebrews 2:8, NKJV)

The force of his argument is simple: God created man to rule over all the works of His hands, but we can see clearly that man has not yet achieved that kind of rule over creation. Later in the same chapter, the author of Hebrews points out that every human is bound by death (Hebrews 2:15). As long as even one created thing maintains control over humanity, we have not yet achieved the purpose of God in our creation.

Despite this observation, Hebrews 2 is not a pessimistic chapter. The quote from Psalm 8 is introduced with a promise, by which humanity is distinguished from the angels:

For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels. (Hebrews 2:5, NKJV)

The world to come, however it will be manifested after the judgment, will be placed under the dominion of mankind. Thus, although we have failed to accomplish God's purpose in the present creation, He will prepare another creation where our full potential as His faithful co-regents will be realized. The second chapter of Hebrews deals with the fact that the work of Christ is designed to perfect us and prepare us for that reign in the world to come. In this chapter, the following points are developed:

1. The rule of the world to come has been given to men, not angels (vv. 5-8).
2. Men have not yet achieved complete control over creation (v. 8).
3. By contrast to the rest of humanity, Jesus *has* achieved complete control (v. 9).

4. Jesus had to become human so that He could make a way from our present weakness to the strength and authority appointed to us from the beginning (vv. 10-16).
5. Thus, He is able to assist us in our weakest moments (vv. 17-18), since His work as our High Priest is designed to strip away our weakness and bondage to be replaced with strength and authority.

We conclude, then, that God created humanity to wield His delegated authority over all of creation. Even though we have not yet accomplished this purpose, God still wishes to see us fulfil His original design. For that reason, He has already placed the world to come under human dominion, and His present work is designed to qualify and enable His human servants to inherit this honor.

In the next issue, we hope to explore how sin and grace interact with God's purpose for humanity.

*"If we endure,
We shall also reign with Him."
(2 Timothy 2:12, NKJV)*

— M. S.

A Question Regarding Hebrews 2

During the editing process, my co-editor was a little surprised by my interpretation of Hebrews 2 in the foregoing essay. Specifically, I take the "man" and "son of man" in the quote from Psalm 8 and the following phrase in Hebrews 2:8, *"For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him,"* to be a reference to humanity in general. He, by contrast, has always understood these verses to be a specific reference to the authority of Christ. He has asked that I develop the thought a little more. Lord willing, I will devote an essay to that purpose in the next issue.

— M. S.

Bible Interpretation, No. 1

When we start to read the Bible, we may notice that it is different from any other book that we have ever read. This isn't unusual, since we regularly encounter all kinds of different books. Textbooks are written differently from novels, which are not the same kind of book as a cookbook. Every kind of book is written in a different style so that it can achieve its intended purpose. A novel won't make much sense if it's written like a cookbook, nor will a textbook be clear or effective if its information is hidden among the plot and characters of a narrative story. In the same way, the Bible was written for a purpose, and the way that it is written has helped it to accomplish that purpose ever since it was first published.

In this essay, we will notice several important facts about how the Bible was written. This knowledge will help prepare us to understand what we find in its pages¹:

1 – The Bible Was Written a Long Time Ago

The oldest book of the Bible (Genesis) was written almost 3,500 years ago, and the newest (Revelation) is almost 2,000 years old. This means that the pages of Scripture are filled with references to countries, events, and people that can otherwise only be found in history books. It also means that the authors of the Bible knew nothing about the world today. This does not mean that the Bible is irrelevant to us, but we should expect to come across names and information that are unfamiliar to us, even though they were common knowledge 2,000 years ago.

2 – The Bible Was Written in Faraway Places

Much of the Bible was written in the country of Israel in what we today call the Middle East. The rest was written around the Mediterranean Sea – particularly in Turkey, Greece, and Italy. In the ancient world, and even

¹ The following list is loosely adapted from chapter 1, “The Task of Bible Interpretation” in Richard Alan Fuhr and Andreas Köstenberger, *Inductive Bible Study* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), pp. 2-19.

today, life in these places was often quite different from what we know in our home country. We will read about different plants, animals, and even calamities that affected the lives of God's biblical people, all of which were shaped by the land where these events took place. Likewise, the land gave more significance to certain events and expressions in the Bible: why do the prophets say that God dwelt on Mount Zion (Isaiah 8:18)? Why did the apostle Paul spend so much time in boats (e.g. Acts 21:1; 27:1)? The answers to these questions rely on the shape of the land where they lived.

3 – The Bible Was Written in Another Culture

Just as the Bible was written in a faraway time and place, it was written in a different culture. This affects the kinds of people we will meet in its pages – shepherds, rabbis, and centurions probably haven't been a part of our everyday experience – as well as the ways that they interact. We should expect to see things like unusual greetings, strange customs, and unfamiliar titles. We are, in essence, looking in on the lives of people from thousands of years ago.

4 – The Bible Was Written in Other Languages

The Old Testament was written in two languages – Hebrew and Aramaic – while the New Testament was written entirely in Greek. All three of these languages are significantly different from English and from each other. We access the Bible today through translations, which have been produced by scholars who have devoted their lives to understanding these languages and transferring their meaning into English. We can be confident that good translations of the Bible do exist, but the fact that our language is different from the languages of the Bible will shape the way we read it.

5 – The Bible Is Made up of Smaller Books

The Bible is made up of 66 smaller books, which were written by more than 30 authors across 1,500 years. The style and content of each of the books varies just as much as the authors. As a result, our expectations will be a little bit different depending on which part of the Bible we are reading.

Some books were written as poetry, others are historical narratives, and yet others record speeches and letters responding to specific questions and situations. The author and purpose of each book of the Bible will shape how we read them. For example, we might expect to find more figurative language and exaggeration in poetry as opposed to a historical narrative.

6 – The Bible is Supernatural

Human authors wrote down the words of the Bible, but the truths it contains came from God. God is the Creator of everything, and He alone knows the secrets behind the world we see and know today. The Bible is the tool He has chosen to teach us about Himself and about spiritual things. For this reason, much of what we read in the Bible could not be known if God had not revealed it to human authors. Therefore, when we approach the Bible, we should expect to learn things that cannot be learned anywhere else.

7 – The Bible is Consistent

Even though the Bible was written by so many people across such a long period of time, everything it says is part of one consistent revelation from the beginning of time to the establishment of the church. This is because God is the ultimate author of every word in the Bible. We shouldn't expect to see genuine contradictions or false information in the Bible.

8 – The Bible is Meant to Be Applied

The Bible is not impersonal. It is not simply a textbook on life in Israel 2,000 years ago. It is meant to guide our lives today. Despite the marks of its age and background, the truths that God reveals through the Bible remain just as important as they were the day they were written down. This means that we should approach the Bible with the expectation that we will learn from what we find in it. God is still speaking to us in His Word, but we must be ready to listen.

– M. S.

A New Translation of 1 Corinthians 1

My home congregation is presently going through a study of the book of 1 Corinthians. As part of my preparation for each sermon, I determined to produce my own translation of the book. I have no presumptions that my translation will equal the others available in quality or scholarship – my inexperience and limited qualifications certify my inability – but I have found it to be a helpful tool to look at Paul's letter again with a fresh perspective. I will present my translation in appropriately sized segments in each issue. The translation will be followed by a comparison between my translation and several major versions², where I will discuss any meaningful differences between them.

1 Corinthians 1:1-31

“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother – to the assembly of God that is in Corinth, to those who have been made holy in Christ Jesus, called to be holy, with all who appeal to the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, in every place – both their Lord and ours. Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God always regarding you because of the grace of God that was given to you in Christ Jesus, for you were made rich in all things through Him – in every word and every knowledge, just as the witness of Christ was confirmed among you so that you do not fall short in any gift as you eagerly await the revelation of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who will also strengthen us toward a

² In general, I plan to compare the NASB 1995, the NKJV, the ESV, the NIV, the NRSV, and the translation published by Alexander Campbell in the 19th century, which is popularly referred to as *The Living Oracles*. When it seems helpful, I may make reference to Martin Luther's German translation, as well as the *Elberfelder Bibel* and the *Schlachter 2000* translations in the same language. The fact that I have used these translations for research does not indicate any preference on my part. In fact, I have made an effort to include translations from a variety of backgrounds.

blameless end in the day of our Lord, Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

But I urge you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you may speak the same thing – all of you – and let there be no schism in you. Rather, let yourselves be joined together in the same mind and in the same purpose. For it has been made clear to me regarding you, my brethren, by Chloe's family, that there is strife among you. I say this, that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos," "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Is Christ divided into shares? Paul was not crucified on your behalf, was he? Nor were you baptized into the name of Paul, were you? I thank God that I did not baptize even one of you – excepting Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized into my name. I did also baptize the household of Stephanus, otherwise I do not know if I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach, not in wisdom of word, so that the cross of Christ may not be nullified.

For the logic of the cross seems foolish to those who are perishing, but toward those who are being saved – us – it is the power of God. For it is written:

*I will destroy the wisdom of wise men
And I will refuse the understanding of those who understand'*

Where is a wise man? Where is a scholar? Where is a debater of this age? Did God not cause the wisdom of the world to become foolish? For since, in God's wisdom, the world did not know God through wisdom, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of preaching. For the Jews ask for a miracle and the Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ as crucified – a point of revulsion for the Jews and a point of foolishness for the nations. But for the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is God's power and God's wisdom, because God's foolishness is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

See your calling, brethren; there are not many wise (by the world's judgment), not many strong, not many of noble birth. Rather, God chose the foolish things of the world, so that He may put the wise to shame; and God chose the weak things of the world, so that He may put the strong things to shame; and God chose the insignificant things of the world and the things that are despised – the things that are not – so that the things that are may be abolished. This is so that no flesh may boast in the presence of God. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who was made to be wisdom from God for us, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, so that it may be just as it is written:

Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”

Notes on the Translation

The first chapter of 1 Corinthians is not a difficult passage to translate, so the differences that exist between translations are primarily a matter of style. The following comments will be organized by verse number, with the quote from my translation given, since I have not included verse numbers in the text above.

2: *“To the assembly of God that is in Corinth”* – The word ἐκκλησία (ekklesia) is particularly difficult to translate into English. In the Greco-Roman world, this word most often referred to a “regularly summoned legislative body³,” such as the democratic assembly in classical Athens. This would imply English words like *Senate* or *Congress*. However, since the congregations of the New Testament were not given the authority to legislate, these translations are unsatisfactory. Thus, the term seems to retain the official nature of the Greek legislative assemblies, without the legal force.

³ Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000). In loco. Logos.

Most English translations (NASB, NKJV, ESV, NIV, and NRSV) translate the word with *church*, which is a good translation in its normal signification. However, this word's range of meaning may include a cathedral or building, as well as an organization, such as the Catholic church, to the exclusion of its members. Thus, I opted to use a more neutral word, *assembly*, to emphasize that the letter is addressed to the Christians in Corinth as a whole. In this translation, I follow the sense favored by the German translations of the Bible, which use either *Gemeinde* ("community") or *Versammlung* ("assembly").

12: "*I belong to Paul...*" Literally, the Greek says, "I am of Paul," etc. I have changed the expression slightly in English to clarify the kind of relationship Paul is describing. The divisions in Corinth were based on a problem of identity, going beyond simple association. Thus, the stronger language of saying "*I belong to this preacher and his faction*" better communicates the problem. This is how the NRSV, *Schlachter 2000*, and Luther's translation expresses it, while the NIV uses a similar expression, "I follow Paul," etc.

13: "*Nor were you baptized into the name of Paul...*" I have retained the transliteration of the Greek word βαπτίζω (baptizo) instead of translating it with *immersed* (as Campbell does in *The Living Oracles*). This is because both words in English require more specification. The Greek word specifies a ceremonial washing through immersion, usually with a religious significance⁴.

In English, the word *baptize* retains the religious significance of the ceremony, but, in many cases, the action of *immersion* has been replaced with sprinkling or pouring. Thus, the word *baptize* communicates the religious aspect of the action, but not the form that it took in the New Testament.

By contrast, the word *immersed* gives us the clear picture that Christians were plunged under water during baptism, but the English word does not carry

⁴ Ibid., in loco.

any religious significance. Thus, it becomes necessary to explain what immersion means and what role it plays in the scheme of redemption.

Since Paul's argument in this passage relies on the religious significance of baptism – i.e., “you have no religious bond with Paul through baptism” – it seemed best to choose the translation that clearly communicated that aspect of baptism.

18: “*The logic of the cross...*” The Greek word λόγος (logos) means, most often, *word*, but it may also mean *logic* or *reason*⁵. Both would work and carry, effectively, the same meaning in this context – i.e., the message of the cross seems foolish because the logic or reasoning behind it does not make sense to the human mind. The preceding context would imply that the *message* itself is in view – Paul has just emphasized his role as a preacher, but the following context is based more on the logic behind the message, since Paul discusses the foolishness and wisdom of what is preached. Thus, either translation may be accurate.

23: “*A point of revulsion for the Jews*” The Greek word σκάνδαλον (skandalon) is translated as a *stumbling block* in each of the English translations under consideration, which encapsulates its meaning of a *cause of sin* or *point of offense* or *revulsion*⁶. I have translated it with the latter term to emphasize the reason why the Jews could not accept Jesus as their Christ; crucifixion was such a shameful and revolting thing for the Jews that they could not accept a crucified Savior, no matter what evidence supported Him. This was the very thing that they could not accept.

– M. S.

⁵ Ibid., in loco.

⁶ Ibid., in loco.

The Source of Christian Unity

Comments on 1 Corinthians 1:10-31

Introduction

The apostle Paul opens his letter to the Corinthians with a plea that will form the backbone of the letter – unity within the congregation. The whole book will cover several different subjects, but that pervading theme will appear time and time again. Tragically, the church at Corinth was characterized by its divisions. There were several disagreements that had been reported to Paul, each of which was driving a wedge between members of the same congregation. Paul uses this letter to address each of these issues, and as he does so, he continually points his readers to the importance of the unity that they had together in Christ.

The first section of the letter, which spans chapters 1-4, deals with the foundation of the church's unity. Paul's readers did not share the same focal point, and so their lives were tracing different trajectories. They had all been bound together in a moment of time by their experiences with Paul and the formation of the congregation, but their different trajectories would tear the church apart if they did not all individually reorient and commit themselves to the same goal and purpose as a congregation. In fact, the church had already fractured. Thus, it was necessary for them to abandon their own conceit and desires and unite in a trusting obedience to God alone.

10-11

Paul begins with an appeal to the Lord Jesus Christ, whose name unites us all in fellowship (v. 9). This is a simple appeal to the source of Christian unity. Except for families, most Christians would not know one another, and certainly wouldn't have a meaningful bond if it were not for Christ. When each one of us is baptized, we are firmly pledging our faith in Christ and committing to pursue Him relentlessly for the remainder of our lives. This gives us something in common, much deeper than a shared

experience; we share one goal and purpose. No matter what divides us or threatens to tear our fellowship apart, we should be able to make peace in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Paul had evidently received a letter from certain members of the congregation in Corinth, who appealed for his help to heal the strife among them. Here, he simply refers to the fact that there were contentions among them. Most likely, these arguments centered around the issues that Paul will address throughout the letter – church discipline, marriage and divorce, things offered to idols, the communion, spiritual gifts, organization in the assembly, etc. Evidently, the church had been split into different groups with different feelings on each of these issues, so that the assembly was pulled in different directions by these competing factions.

Paul's solution begins with a conviction. His plea is that all Christians should speak the same thing, be without divisions, and that they should share one mind and one judgment. Practically speaking, this is a goal, not a simple reality that can be accomplished in a moment. When we come together to form a congregation, we bring with us as many different minds and judgments as there are people present. We should not enter an assembly with the determination to prove ourselves right and justify ourselves above the group – rather, our desire needs to be for a sincere unity where every one of us shares in a full knowledge and understanding of God's will. This contrasts with the picture in Corinth, which Paul describes in the next verses.

12-13

The situation as it had been described to Paul involved sects or factions within the congregation which centered around different preachers or teachers. Paul names four – Paul, Apollos (who traveled to Corinth after his own conversion and evidently did much teaching there (Acts 19:1)), Cephas (or Peter, see John 1:42), and Christ. All four names mentioned were faithful preachers of the gospel, Christ Himself being the center point, but it is possible that other names were involved. Later in the letter, Paul

mentions that he spoke using his name and Apollos' name to spare the reputation of those who were being divisive, for it was easier to talk about the principle with neutral names, so that he would not seem to be attacking any particular person in the congregation (1 Corinthians 4:6-7). Thus, by using these four names, he may not be describing the sects that actually existed. Rather, he was setting up an imaginary parallel to the real situation so that the Corinthians could think about what was happening with an unbiased eye.

It is interesting that sincere followers of any of the four teachers Paul named would find unity, since all four preached the same gospel. The fact of the problem lay not in the doctrines or personalities at the center of the sects, but in the existence of sects in the first place. It is possible, even easy to become divisive and destructive to the church while focusing on a doctrine or set of doctrines that is correct. The immediate problem is not in who is correct and who is not, it is in the creation of an "us and them" relationship. As long as one group identifies as a distinct sect separate from the other, there is no hope for unification. The triumph of truth and unity in the church cannot come from a war between sects until all are submissive to the most correct one. Rather, it must come from a dissolution of all sects and sect-based thinking with all conceit toward others, to be replaced with a mutual commitment to follow Christ alone.

Paul appeals to this in his reply and rebuke toward the divisive groups in Corinth – what basis do we have for unity in any other than Christ? It is meaningless to speak of multiple factions within the body of Christ, for He is a unifier, not a divider. Likewise, there is no benefit to faith in Paul or any other human, for Paul cannot offer forgiveness through crucifixion, nor have we made a covenant with Paul through baptism. Only in Christ can we find our common ground.

14-17

Paul's comments in this passage do not lessen the importance of baptism. His concern, based on the factions that had formed at Corinth, was that

something as good and important as baptism could be twisted into a reason for elevating certain Christians as better than others. It was no special distinction for one to be baptized by an apostle or by any other, for baptism does not create a covenant between the baptizer and the baptized. Instead, every baptism creates a relationship between the baptized individual and God through Christ. Paul feared that that principle might be misunderstood if he had been the one to baptize all who heard him preach in Corinth. Instead, it seems they were baptized by local members or some of Paul's traveling companions. His failure to insist on being the one who baptized those converted while there protected him from false accusations and protected the congregation from one possible division.

Thus, when Paul says that "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel," he means what he says. His self-worth and his measure of success did not depend on how many he baptized personally. It did matter to him that those who obeyed the gospel were baptized (see, for example, Romans 6), but he did not feel any compulsion to be the one who personally baptized those who believed what he preached. Why? Because his emphasis was on the gospel. He had no personal stake in performing each baptism. He only rejoiced that were baptized.

Further, he did not even want his preaching to draw attention to him and his personality. He forewent "wisdom of word," because he was afraid that Jesus' sacrifice would be made negligible in the gospel that he preached if his emphasis rested on his own ability to speak well, or reason well, and if he did not rely on the power and wisdom of God. In other words, Paul's own conduct among the Corinthians reflected his determination to pursue unity in peace through Christ. He did nothing that could set himself up as a worthy leader who was the proper target of the Corinthians' faith and respect. To this end, he avoided baptizing people himself, to ensure that the Christians' obedience to the faith was not bound up with his reputation, and he preached in humility so that no one could accuse him of success based on his own ability, apart from the power of the gospel.

How could Paul preach in a way that demoted his own abilities and wisdom? It is simple – the gospel that he preached is not the logical product of any human philosophy. Paul could never sincerely be credited with inventing the gospel, because it does not make sense to the human mind. The message of the cross is foolish; it is counter-intuitive to trust in a dead man to save our souls. When Paul preached this gospel to the philosophers at Athens, many of them mocked him because his claims were nonsensical (Acts 17:32). There was a man who was killed, but He became alive again, and He will save you from death if you believe and obey Him.

It was important for God to use something so foolish to save men because of pride and conceit. He foresaw this in Isaiah 29:14, which Paul quotes, when He saw that the people of Israel had no desire to learn from Him. They paid homage to Him in their worship, but they did not understand the things that they did, nor did they want to find out. They were interested in their own knowledge and wisdom but would not learn from God. Therefore, in verse 14, God declared that He would work through miracles and signs that would not make sense to their wise and discerning men, to prove that He is not subject to their thoughts and their ideas. Men had forgotten God in their wisdom, so He would reject their wisdom in salvation. Thus, wherever the message of the gospel is preached, so is the failure of human wisdom. We must rely on a power and a grace outside of ourselves.

22-25

How was the crucifixion of Christ received in the first century? It is easy to forget just how foolish the gospel can sound if we have been raised with it all around us. Our precise knowledge may vary, but the simple fact that Jesus died to save us from our sins is widely known. Because of this, the actual significance of the message can sometimes be lost. Paul explains it from two points of view: the Jews, and the Greeks.

The Jews, who had been God's chosen people under the Law of Moses, expected always to be His people. They were looking for a sign, a show of

God's power – one that would promise victory over Rome and accomplish God's political domination of the world. Thus, it did not make sense to them when Jesus came as the Lord's Messiah and preached peaceful submission to Rome. It did not make sense to them when He refused to take a stand against the foreign powers who had dominion over the Promised Land, and it certainly did not seem to them like Jesus wielded the power of God when He was nailed to a Roman cross and died. This was a point of revulsion for them because they simply could not accept that this was the power of God at work. How could God be so weak? Paul's answer: even if God seemed weaker than He had been in days past, His might still far outweighed all that humanity can muster. In fact, His power was shown in a much greater way through Jesus' resurrection and victory over death – the most fearsome weapon that Rome or any earthly adversary could yield. God would not show His power the way that they expected. He would not rearrange the nations of the world, He would reveal Himself in a much more significant way, through a moment of apparent weakness.

Greek culture was preeminent in the ancient world. A few hundred years before Jesus lived, Alexander the Great conquered much of the known world and installed Greek cities and cultural features throughout the known world. Rome continued that legacy, for although Rome had a distinct culture of its own, they had such reverence for the achievements of classical Greece that they encouraged the spread of that culture even as they themselves tried to be more Greek. The heights of Greek culture were marked by much philosophical speculation, from which no religion could be held as sacred.

As we noticed in Acts 17, the idea of the resurrection from the dead did not pass this kind of speculation. Those Greeks who rejected the gospel of Christ did so on the basis that it did not make any sense. How could a dead man save us, and how can we believe that the dead rise if we have not seen it happen? However, those who believed found that the seemingly foolish premise of the gospel betrayed a wisdom greater than man has ever known.

26-29

Because of the apparent foolishness and weakness of the gospel, Paul was able to point out that the majority of those who believed were, by the world's standards, foolish and weak. It is more difficult for someone who has power to submit himself to the authority of another – but one who has spent his whole life serving another will recognize a wise and gentle master and eagerly enter his service. Likewise, one who is wise has a hard time admitting his inability to reason through a problem, but one who knows his intellectual limitations will have an easy time relying on someone else to provide the answer. Thus, God put to shame those who seem to be powerful or wise, because they have been unable to solve the problems of human sin and suffering.

Why has God so worked through foolishness and weakness, rather than building a mighty nation of warriors and scholars? The answer is simple – everyone who will be saved must come to terms with their total reliance on God. If we could reason our own salvation or manage to be saved by force of strength or will, we would be able to glory in His presence. We would be able to walk up to Him and honestly say, “I found a way that was just as good or better than the one you made.” Then, we would have a reason to set ourselves on a pedestal above those who are weak and foolish, because we were able to figure it out or make it work when they couldn't. Then, we would have a sincere basis for division among God's people.

This is important when we remember the context. The creation of sects or factions requires a certain level of conceit. If we form into a sect, we will always end up looking down on anyone outside our group. Why? Because we have achieved something that you have failed at. We have worked out the truth, and you poor, foolish, and weak brethren have failed.

If we think ourselves wise or strong in anyway, we cause the cross of Christ to be of no effect. It is no longer a question of reliance on God, but a matter of achievement. Who has this knowledge or that truth? If you do not know it, you are lesser in the service of God. Paul tells us in no uncertain terms

that all that we have in the gospel has been given to us. We should not become conceited regarding what has been given, because we would not have it if God had not been patient with us. We must all recognize our weakness and foolishness in the presence of God to sincerely accept the gospel. If any ego based on wisdom or strength remains, then division is all but certain.

30-31

This is not to say that we do not have access to wisdom, nor that we cannot overcome sin by the strength that is given to us, only that our wisdom and strength comes to us from God through Christ. It is something external to us, and only when we accept that can we have real unity in the church. It is not wrong to be thankful and glad that we have achieved as much as we have, or that we understand as much as we do, but our glory must be found in the fact that God has given it to us. We find that our unity as Christians is based on Him who gives us all things. An old man who is wise in the Scriptures can rejoice in the first steps taken by a spiritual child, for all of the old man's wisdom comes from God. He knows that, if God had not intervened, he would be no farther in wisdom or strength than the new convert. The differences between them are an accident of time and circumstance; they are bound together in the strength and wisdom of Christ, who will lead both to the same destination at the end of the road.

— M. S.

A Brief Introduction to the Book of Mark

Who wrote the Gospel of Mark?

All of the early copies of this book have the title *κατα Μαρκον*, “According to Mark,” or some variation of the same phrase. Since we do not have the original copy of this book, we don’t know if the title was written by the author or not. However, we do know that it is very ancient, and it agrees with all of the facts we have at our disposal.

The earliest testimony about the authorship of this gospel comes from Papias, whose writings were quoted by Eusebius, an early church historian who lived between 260 and 340 A.D., Irenaeus, and what is called the Anti-Marcionite Prologue to the gospel of Mark. Papias, who goes back far enough that he reportedly knew the apostle John, said that Mark was Peter's translator, and that he wrote his gospel based on Peter's preaching about Jesus' life. The Anti-Marcionite prologue reports that Mark wrote the gospel in Italy. Irenaeus supports the other testimonies, although he adds the idea that Peter himself spent his life preaching in Rome⁷.

We do not know with absolute certainty that this Mark is the same John Mark who appears in Acts 12, Acts 15, Colossians 4:10, 2 Timothy 4:11, Philemon 24, and 1 Peter 5:13. In 1 Peter 5:13, the apostle sends greetings from "Mark my son." This would seem to indicate clearly that Peter was working with a man named Mark.

It is not inconceivable that this could be a different Mark – Mark was a common name at the time – but it is rather likely that the John Mark known to the apostles in Jerusalem would travel to with Peter. When Peter was miraculously released from prison in Acts 12, he knew and trusted John Mark well enough that he went straight to Mark's mother's house. Further, John Mark showed an interest in working with foreign evangelists whenever he could. He traveled with Paul and Barnabas in Acts 12, though Acts 15:38 indicates that he left them before they had finished their work. He later traveled with Barnabas (Acts 15:39), he might have visited the church at Colossae (Colossians 4:10), and he helped Paul with his labors in Rome (2 Timothy 4:11, Philemon 24). Since he was known to travel with evangelists whenever he could and evidently made evangelistic journeys on his own, it

⁷ These sources are described in detail, with references to the passages in question, in Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, (London & New York: Continuum, 2006), 5-8. Logos, with further sources and comments in Thomas C. Oden (Editor) and Christopher A. Hall (Editor), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament II, Mark*, (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), xxi-xxiv. Logos

should not be surprising that he would join with Peter when he made an evangelistic trip (that Peter, known to Paul as Cephas, made such trips is referenced in 1 Corinthians 9:4).

Where did he get his information?

The historical reports of Papias, Irenaeus, and the Anti-Marcionite Prologue make it clear that Mark's primary and, perhaps, only source for his gospel was the apostle Peter – specifically the things that he learned about Jesus' life and ministry while traveling with Peter. Papias even describes how Peter preached – not biographically, but to meet the specific needs of his audience whenever he delivered a sermon. Further, Papias reports that Mark made it his purpose to record all the details about Jesus' life that Peter used in his sermons without adding anything to it. If this is true – and we have no reason to doubt it – then the content of this gospel comes from Peter, while the organization comes from Mark, who took Peter's disconnected discourses and placed them in a chronological or topical order.

When was it written?

This is a difficult question to answer because modern scholarship is built on the presupposition that the gospel of Mark was written before the book of Matthew⁸. The advocates of this theory suppose that there are significant differences between the historical life of Jesus and the way that the gospels present it. The final Christian beliefs, they say, took years to develop after Jesus died, so it would have been impossible for the gospel writers to agree so closely with each other if they had not conferred ahead of time or copied from one another to make sure that their accounts agreed down to the minute details. Therefore, they conclude it is simplest to assume that Mark

⁸ For a short description of this theory, see the preface in Ezra P. Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), v-vi. Logos.

was written first, since it is the shortest and simplest account, and that Matthew and Luke copied what Mark said and added their own comments.

This theory need not guide our comments here. It is an attempt to explain how three writers in three places devised the same fictional story without direct collaboration. It assumes that the gospel is, in fact, fictional. The difficulties that drive the theory disappear when we accept the fact that each of the gospels describes actual events that happened while Jesus was alive. Each of the three synoptic authors was either present at the events mentioned (Matthew) or studied closely with people who were (Mark, Luke). Since all three are describing the same events, we do not need to adopt assumptions about who copied from whom. Mark's account can agree with Matthew's whether he wrote first or second.

If we set aside the issues that drive this school of thought, it seems that Mark probably wrote sometime between 60-70 A.D. This is because most historical accounts of Peter's life place his death around the year 65 A.D. Mark's determination to record Peter's teachings about Jesus fit best near the end of Peter's life. According to the book of Acts, Peter spent the first years after Jesus' death in Jerusalem and the regions around it. Later, after the book's focus shifts to follow Paul's travels, it seems that Peter did begin to travel to preach to different areas, though there is little evidence to show where he had preached (1 Corinthians 9:4). It is probably during this period that Mark traveled with him, and he would have written either during or after this experience.

How does the book fit into the New Testament?

Because Mark is the shortest and simplest of the gospels, it has often been neglected in New Testament studies. Matthew focuses on how Jesus' life interacted with the prophecies of the Old Testament, Luke presents us with a more traditional biographical account of Jesus' life, based on research of eyewitness accounts, and John provides a more theologically based account to help us comprehend the divinity of Jesus and the significance of His incarnation. Where does Mark fit in? Why was it written?

As with our previous questions, the answer seems to lie in the book's mode of composition. Mark wrote down Peter's recollections about Jesus' life because his own ability to preach depended on it. Peter had set out to teach those who had never heard of Christ the important details of His life, and so the gospel that records these messages serves as a sort of inspired guide to evangelism. What does someone need to know to believe in Jesus and obey the gospel? Here, in these 16 chapters, we have the apostle Peter's program to educate someone from total ignorance to full faith in Christ.

This suggestion works well with what we know of Mark's life. After traveling with Peter, Mark went on to continue working with Paul and probably kept preaching after Paul's death. Where he had previously had access to the knowledge of both apostles and more experienced evangelists like Barnabas, now it fell to him to preserve and preach the gospel for the next generation of converts. The leadership of God's people was passing into the hands of those who had never known Jesus personally, and so the important details of his life needed to be copied for the benefit of every subsequent generation.

— M. S.

To Our Readers

We welcome all essays and inquiries on biblical themes, as long as they conform with the principles of publication listed at the head of this issue. Next month, we hope to continue exploring the themes that have been introduced in this first issue, and we are excited to entertain contributions and questions from our readers regarding these. This first issue is about half the maximum allotted length, so we anticipate that there will be plenty of room for new discussions as well.

Please direct all contributions to editor@christianprospect.com.

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