

WISDOM FOR THE PERFECT:
PAUL'S CHALLENGE TO THE CORINTHIAN
CHURCH (1 CORINTHIANS 2:6–16)

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What was at stake when the church in Corinth was divided? Abandoning the older quest for a Corinthian heresy, recent studies have rightly tended to understand the factions in Corinth against the background of the conventions of Greco-Roman rhetoric. It should not be overlooked, however, that Paul understood these factions as symptomatic of a grave theological error in Corinth.¹ The thesis of this article is that by attempting to excel by worldly stan-

¹ The trend to focus on the factions as an ethical problem rather than a theological one seems to have started with Johannes Munck, who remarked that “the Corinthians’ wrong conception of the Gospel as wisdom is connected with their misunderstanding of other points; but there is no dogmatic controversy in the first four chapters . . . the Corinthians’ shortcomings in respect of their bickerings are regarded in this section as primarily ethical failures” (*Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* [London: SCM, 1959], 152). Munck also saw theological implications of the conflict, but other scholars have tended to understand the conflict in exclusively sociological terms. Laurence L. Welborn observes: “The terms with which *σχίσμα* is associated make it clear that it is neither a religious heresy nor a harmless clique that the author has in mind, but factions engaged in a struggle for power”; and he thinks that “[i]t is no longer necessary to argue against the position that the conflict which evoked 1 Corinthians 1–4 was essentially theological in character” (“On the Discord in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 1–4 and Ancient Politics,” *JBL* 106 [1987]: 87, 88). According to Stephen M. Pogoloff, “Paul is addressing an exigence of the ethical dimensions of division, not doctrinal divergence” (*LOGOS AND SOPHIA: The Rhetorical Situation of 1 Corinthians* [SBLDS 134; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992], 104). The judgment of Raymond Pickett goes along the same lines: “Paul gives no indication that any theological conceptions, or misconceptions, are the cause of the dissensions” (*The Cross in Corinth: The Social Significance of the Death of Jesus* [JSNTSup 143; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997], 37). Similarly, Peter Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul’s Relations with the Corinthians* (WUNT 2/23; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1987), 181; David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement* (Studies of the New Testament and Its World; Edinburgh: Clark, 1996), 220. Duane Litfin emphasizes Paul’s theological interpretation of the

dards, the Corinthians were running the risk of defining themselves as those for whom the gospel was hidden and thus forfeiting their salvation. After a brief survey of recent research on the factionalism in Corinth, we shall see how Paul's discourse on wisdom in 1 Cor 2:6–16 serves his rhetorical purpose by undermining the basis for the factions. A true comprehension of the gospel is irreconcilable with the bickering that characterized the Corinthian church. In order to demonstrate our thesis, we will show that the divine wisdom in 1 Cor 2:6–16 is to be identified with the gospel, that this wisdom is hidden under its apparent foolishness for those who want to be wise according to the standards of this world, and that the perfect, who receive this wisdom, are all Christians. We will then see that Paul is challenging the Corinthians: Will they side with the wise of this world, or will they show themselves as being among the perfect, that is, the Christians, who have rejected the standards of the world? The factionalism, based on competition by worldly standards, indicates that the former is the case. For Paul, sociology is indicative of theology. The uniqueness of 1 Corinthians, therefore, can be fully appreciated only when the letter is examined in its theological as well as its sociological world.

I. The Factions

First Corinthians 1:10–4:21 may be characterized as deliberative rhetoric, the thesis statement being found in 1:10: “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”² The reasons for the factionalism in Corinth were

issues, but he downplays the implications, insisting that there is “no indication that Paul had discovered within their midst theological error of the most grievous sort. There is not the slightest hint to suggest that the Corinthians had exchanged the Gospel Paul had preached for another, or that they were somehow vitiating its efficacy by denying or distorting some of its central tenets” (*St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation* [SNTSMS 79; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 180). Similarly, R. Dean Anderson, Jr., *Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Paul* (Biblical Exegesis & Theology 18; Kampen: Kok, 1996), 248. See also Troels Engberg-Pedersen, who criticizes Gerd Theissen's point of view for being “restricted to that of social function” (“The Gospel and Social Practice According to 1 Corinthians,” *NTS* 33 [1987]: 560). Similarly, William Baird and James D. G. Dunn have noted the scholarly neglect of the theological dimension of the conflict (William Baird, “One Against the Other: Intra-Church Conflict in 1 Corinthians,” in *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul & John in Honor of J. Louis Martyn* [ed. Robert T. Fortna and Beverly R. Gaventa; Nashville: Abingdon, 1990], 131; James D. G. Dunn, *1 Corinthians* [NTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995], 43).

² George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 87; Laurence L. Welborn, “A Conciliatory Principle in 1 Cor 4:6,” *NovT* 29 (1987): 334–35; Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Recon-*

manifold.³ In 1:18–3:23 Paul focuses on the role of wisdom. As has been demonstrated numerous times recently, this discussion reflects contemporary discussions on rhetoric.⁴ His rejection of persuasive words of wisdom in 2:4, and a number of the terms employed in this context, such as *πειθός*, *ἀπόδειξις*, *δύναμις*, *τέλειος*⁵ and the correlation of “word” and “wisdom”⁶ are best understood in this light.

The population of Corinth consisted mainly of freedmen (Strabo 8.6.23; Epict. *Disc.* 4.1.157), a class that was known to indulge in boasting and self-display, in order to enhance their status.⁷ Considering that words of the *καυχ*-group occur with significantly increased frequency in the Corinthian letters (36

ciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians (HUT 28; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1992), 20–64, 198–225; Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 46; Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians* (SP 7; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 69. How closely related 1 Corinthians as a letter actually is to the known Greco-Roman examples of deliberative rhetoric need not concern us here. Cf. the critique of R. Dean Anderson, Jr. (*Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Paul*, 229–38). For our purpose, it suffices to notice that 1:18–4:21 contains a unified argument for the thesis in 1:10.

³ From 1 Cor 11:21–22 we learn that tensions were caused by the differences between the poor and the rich. Laurence L. Welborn maintains that the factions in Corinth must be understood as conflicts between the upper and lower classes. The root of these conflicts was the patronage system and the way the poor became dependent on the rich (“On the Discord,” 99). Similarly, John K. Chow, *Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth* (JSNTSup 75; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 123–66. Cf. the more cautious judgment of Margaret M. Mitchell, however, maintaining that economy was only one among many reasons for the factions in Corinth (*Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 94–95). Although the slogans in 1:12 resemble political slogans, their form does not warrant the conclusion that they should be labels of clearly defined parties associated with Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and Christ (*ibid.*, 82–86).

⁴ This is not to deny that Jewish wisdom traditions may have influenced Paul’s language here (Gerd Theissen, *Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology* [trans. John P. Galvin; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987], 353). But even Jeffrey S. Lamp, in his monograph on Jewish wisdom traditions in 1 Cor 1–4, admits that rhetoric is the primary background (*First Corinthians 1–4 in Light of Jewish Wisdom Traditions: Christ, Wisdom, and Spirituality* [Studies in Bible and Early Christianity 42; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2000], 113–14).

⁵ Lars Hartman, “Some Remarks on 1 Cor. 2:1–5,” *SEÅ* 39 (1974): 116; Timothy H. Lim, “Not in Persuasive Words of Wisdom, but in the Demonstration of the Spirit and Power,” *NovT* 27 (1987): 145–47; Pogoloff, *LOGOS AND SOPHIA*, 141; Timothy B. Savage, *Power through Weakness: Paul’s Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians* (SNTSMS 86; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 71; Bruce W. Winter, *Philo and Paul among the Sophists* (SNTSMS 96; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 154.

⁶ Hans Dieter Betz, “The Problem of Rhetoric and Theology According to the Apostle Paul,” in *L’apôtre Paul: Personnalité, style et conception du ministère* (ed. A. Vanhoye; BETL 73; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1986), 28–32; Welborn, “On the Discord,” 101–2; Pogoloff, *LOGOS AND SOPHIA*, 109–11; Litfin, *St. Paul’s Theology of Proclamation*, 44, 64, 72–73, 96, 119, 122; Anderson, *Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Paul*, 239; Collins, *First Corinthians*, 85.

⁷ Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 39–41.

or 37 times) over against the other Pauline letters (fifteen times in the undisputed letters and once in Ephesians), one may assume that Paul considered boasting to be an issue that needed to be addressed particularly in Corinth. He underscored that boasting in anything save the Lord was excluded (1 Cor 1:31), as the divine election had turned the world's status claims upside down (1:26–28).⁸ When Paul rejected the use of superior words of wisdom (2:1), he was likely referring to the kind of rhetoric that was concerned with self-display, boasting, and abuse of others. The modifier “superior” seems to denote a form of oratory that sought impressive display, in order to be recognized as superior.⁹

Is it possible to more specific? Bruce W. Winter has made a good case that the standards Paul rejects in 1 Cor 1–4 are sophistic standards. The sophistic movement appears to have gained a significant footing in Corinth at the time of Paul. The sophists were known to recruit disciples and engage in bitter rivalry.¹⁰ It could be such a rivalry that is reflected in 1 Cor 1:12; 3:1–4.¹¹ Possibly, Paul's description of himself in 1 Cor 2:1–5 was designed to emphasize the contrast between his arrival in Corinth and the conventions for a sophist's arrival in a new town. The sophist was supposed to give a sample of his eloquence, for acceptance or rejection by the city.¹² Paul refused to provide such a display.¹³ His statement in 2:1 need not be taken as a flat rejection of rhetoric, therefore, but Paul would not allow his identity as a teacher to be determined by anything other than the cross of Christ.

II. The Wisdom

To understand Paul's discourse on the wisdom for the perfect in 2:6–16, it is important to note the rhetorical function of this passage in the wider context. At the end of the *narratio* (1:11–17), Paul appeals to his own example and introduces the antithesis between “word of wisdom” and “the cross of Christ” (1:17). In the first subsequent section of argument (1:18–4:21), he elaborates

⁸ Dieter Sänger, “Die *δυνατοί* in 1 Kor 1, 26,” *ZNW* 76 (1985): 287–90; Winter, *Philo and Paul*, 191.

⁹ Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 72.

¹⁰ Winter, *Philo and Paul*, 116–44.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 170–76.

¹² Favorinus, who was associated with the Second Sophistic, reports having given a sample of his rhetoric at such an event (Dio Chrys., *Or.* 37.1). See also Winter, *Philo and Paul*, 135, 149–51.

¹³ In this regard, Paul's attitude resembles that of Dio Chrysostom, who in his forty-seventh *Oration* provided a disclaimer that pleasure, beauty, or wisdom (*σοφία*) should not be expected from his speech. See Winter, *Philo and Paul*, 152–61; similarly Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 100–101.

on this antithesis in 1:18–3:23.¹⁴ The purpose of this section is to juxtapose two value systems, that of God and that of the world, and their opposing evaluations of the gospel. Paul's argument throughout this section centers on the reversal of values that he introduces in 1:18: the word of the cross appears as foolishness for those who are lost, but proves to be the power of God for those who are saved. This double character of the word of the cross is then delineated in the following verses, so that the "foolish" character is elaborated on in 1:19–2:5 and the "powerful" or "wise" character in 2:6–3:23.¹⁵ In 1:19–31 Paul explains how God has turned the values of the world upside down.¹⁶ That which is considered wise in the world is foolishness for God, and vice versa (1:21, 25; cf. 2:14). Appealing again to his own example, Paul then emphasizes that he takes care to perform his ministry in accordance with the divine reversal of values. Therefore, he is not concerned to appear impressive (2:1–5). God's wisdom, communicated to the elect, is then the focus of 2:6–16. After applying this principle to the Corinthians (3:1–4) and once more to himself and to Apollos (3:5–17), Paul gives as his concluding advice in 3:18 a call to conform to this reversal of values: "If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise."¹⁷ If the Corinthians could apprehend this divine standard, there would be no basis for the factionalism.¹⁸ In fact, their evaluation of their

¹⁴ It is possible to see the references to wisdom and foolishness in 1:18–19 and 3:19–20 as forming an *inclusio*, thus identifying 1:18–3:23 as a distinct unit (Collins, *First Corinthians*, 87).

¹⁵ Gerd Theissen observes the parallel structure between 1:18–2:5 and 2:6–3:23. The section 1:18–2:5 he subsumes under the heading "The preaching as foolishness," and 2:6–3:23 under "The preaching as wisdom," finding parallel subsections in 1:18–25 ("The word of the cross as foolishness in the world") and 2:6–16 ("The preaching as wisdom among the perfect"); 1:26–30 and 3:1–4 ("Application to the community"); 2:1–5 ("Application to the apostle") and 3:5–23 ("Application to the apostles") (*Psychological Aspects*, 345).

¹⁶ Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 87. Formally, Dio Chrysostom's thirty-eighth discourse is a parallel. Advising that the Nicomedians achieve concord with the Nicaeans, Dio Chrysostom maintained that the conceived gain they would get from the conflict, "primacy," was really no gain at all (*Or.* 38.32–40).

¹⁷ Contra Mitchell (*Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 209), we take this to be the crucial piece of advice in 1 Cor 1–4. As we will argue, Paul understands the factions theologically, grounded in the Corinthians' failure to allow their value system to be transformed by the message of the gospel.

¹⁸ It has frequently been suggested that Paul's argument in chs. 1–4 is directed specifically to those of the upper classes in the Corinthian church (Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* [trans. John H. Schütz; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982], 72; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Rhetorical Situation and Historical Reconstruction in I Corinthians," *NTS* 33 [1987]: 399; Welborn, "On the Discord," 105). Paul seems to be just as concerned, however, to combat any notion that membership in the church should be misunderstood as a tool for climbing on the social ladder as to explain that being in Christ meant relinquishment of authority and status. The warning against treating the Christian message as a means for enhancing or maintaining one's status seems to have a universal application, for the upper and lower classes alike. That members of

teachers would be radically transformed. Rather than understanding themselves as “belonging to” this or that teacher, they would see the teachers as belonging to them (3:21–23), the teachers being understood in functional, rather than status terms.¹⁹

These observations lead to the conclusion that it is the same divine wisdom that is in view throughout the section,²⁰ a conclusion that is confirmed

the lower classes are among Paul’s intended audience seems to be confirmed when he describes the Corinthians as saying “I belong to . . .” (1:12). The followers, those who wanted to enhance their own status by being associated with someone of repute, are addressed here. Likewise, it is probably not correct that while addressing the entire church, Paul’s real concern in chs. 1–4 is a faction that had claimed independence from him (N. A. Dahl, “Paul and the Church at Corinth According to 1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21,” in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox* [ed. W. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, and N. R. Niebuhr; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967], 325). He is just as eager to dismiss a party that bears his own name (Pogoloff, *LOGOS AND SOPHIA*, 101–2). Moreover, the letter is characterized by deliberative rhetoric, rather than being an apology (see n. 2). See also William Baird, who thinks that Paul was not facing a single front of opposition in 1 Cor (“One Against the Other,” 123; similarly Dunn, *1 Corinthians*, 43).

¹⁹ Winter, *Philo and Paul*, 195.

²⁰ Theissen maintains that the wisdom of 2:6–3:23 should be understood as a higher level of the wisdom mentioned in 1:18–2:5. This interpretation is based on the assumption that the “perfect” should be identified as a mature group of believers (see below) and that a new element is introduced with “the rulers of this age” (2:6, 8), but he finds it odd that 1 Cor 2 would be the only instance where we hear of a revelation restricted to a particular circle of Christians (*Psychological Aspects*, 346–52; similarly Angela Standhartinger, “Weisheit in *Joseph und Aseneth* und den paulinischen Briefen,” *NTS* 47 [2001]: 496). In light of the parallel structure between 1:18–2:5 and 2:6–3:23, it would be more natural to understand the wisdom mentioned in both passages as the same divine wisdom (Sänger, “Die *δυνάτοί* in 1 Kor 1, 26,” 287; E. Elizabeth Johnson, “The Wisdom of God as Apocalyptic Power,” in *Faith and History: Essays in Honor of Paul W. Meyer* [ed. John T. Carroll, Charles H. Cosgrove, and E. Elizabeth Johnson; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990], 141). As for “the rulers of this age,” this must be a reference to the earthly authorities responsible for the crucifixion, a parallel to “the mighty” of 1:26. An identification of the rulers with demonic powers was especially popular among the commentators who explained Paul’s terminology against the background of Gnosticism (Ulrich Wilckens, *Weisheit und Torheit: Eine exegetisch-religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu 1. Kor 1 und 2* [BHT 26; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1959], 61; Walter Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth: An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians* [trans. John E. Steely; Nashville: Abingdon, 1971], 137). But that is unwarranted. Paul never makes any identification of the *ἄρχοντες* as the *ἄρχαί* of Col 1:16; Eph 6:12. Even though *ἄρχων* in the singular is used for Satan, there is no evidence before the second century that the word is used for demons (A. Wesley Carr, “The Rulers of This Age—1 Cor ii:6–8,” *NTS* 23 [1976]: 23–24, 28–30; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 104; cf. Julius Schniewind, “Die Archonten dieses Äons: 1. Kor. 2,6–8,” in *Nachgelassene Reden und Aufsätze* [Töpelmann Theologische Bibliothek 1; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1952], 105–7; Gene Miller, “*Ἀρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος*—A New Look at 1 Cor. 2:6–8,” *JBL* 91 [1972]: 525–26; Ulrich Wilckens, “Zu 1 Kor 2,1–16,” in *Theologia Crucis—Signum Crucis: Festschrift für Erich Dinkler zum 70. Geburtstag* [ed. Carl Andresen and Günter Klein; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1979], 508; Markus Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* [1990; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 163). Anthony C. Thiselton concurs that the word

when we observe how those who appropriate this wisdom are repeatedly designated with a dative that sets them apart as an elect group (“saved” in 1:18, “called” in 1:24, and “perfect” in 2:6). In 1:18 this message is called “the power of God,” a designation that is taken up in 1:24 and identified with “the wisdom of God.” This wisdom of God is then recalled in 2:6. This wisdom is announced also to those who are not spiritual, but to them it appears to be foolishness (2:14), the same reversal of values that characterizes this wisdom in 1:23–24. The wisdom of 2:6, therefore, must be identified with the wisdom of God in 1:21, 24.²¹ In 1:21–24 this wisdom is paralleled with “the gospel” (1:17), “the word of the cross” (1:18), “the foolishness of the proclamation” (1:21), and “Christ crucified” (1:23).²² In 1:30 Christ Jesus is said to have become wisdom

denotes secular leaders, but maintains that the connotations are of “a structural power either by cumulative inbuilt fallenness or by association with still stronger cosmic powers” (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 238). As justification for seeing a reference to spiritual beings, Thiselton refers to the authority of Walter Wink (*Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 44), whose evidence in turn is taken from the *Ascension of Isaiah* (second century C.E.), but he does not show that these traditions antedate Paul.

²¹ Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, vol. 1 (EKK 7/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991), 240; Michael Wolter, “Verborgene Weisheit und Heil für die Heiden: Zur Traditionsgeschichte und Intention des ‘Revelationsschemas,’” *ZTK* 84 (1987): 304; Helmut Merklein, *Der Erste Brief an die Korinther: Kapitel 1–4* (ÖTK; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1992), 224; Collins, *First Corinthians*, 123.

²² Margaret M. Mitchell, “Rhetorical Shorthand in Pauline Argumentation: The Functions of ‘the Gospel’ in the Corinthian Correspondence,” in *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker* (ed. L. A. Jervis and P. Richardson; JSNTSup 108; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 70. Apparently 2:1–2 provides additional evidence for this identification by linking together “mystery” and “Jesus Christ crucified.” But the reading *μυστήριον* in 2:1, although well attested (the Chester Beatty papyri and the first hand of Sinaiticus, as well as Alexandrinus and the Codex Ephraemi) and preferred by N-A²⁷ and most translations, is probably not original. More likely to be correct is the widely attested variant *μαρτύριον* (Vaticanus, a later hand of Sinaiticus, Codex Bezae, Origen, and the Majority text). The case must be considered together with 1:6, where the two alternative readings are *μαρτύριον τοῦ θεοῦ* and *μαρτύριον τοῦ Χριστοῦ*. The best way to explain all the data is to take *μαρτύριον τοῦ Χριστοῦ* as original in 1:6 and *μαρτύριον* in 2:1. The variant *μαρτύριον τοῦ θεοῦ* in 1:6 is then explained as an adaption to the *μαρτύριον τοῦ θεοῦ* in 2:1. The variant *μυστήριον* is explained as an adaption to the *μυστήριον* in 2:7. If, on the other hand, *μυστήριον* is considered original in 2:1, there is no adequate way of accounting for the other variants. Bruce M. Metzger insists that *μαρτύριον* in 2:1 is a copyist’s error through a recollection of 1:6, but then he cannot explain how the reading *μαρτύριον τοῦ θεοῦ* originated in 1:6 (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [2d ed.; Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1975], 545). Moreover, reading *μυστήριον* in 2:1 would take much of the force out of its occurrence in 2:7. It is also easier to assume that a copyist had substituted *μυστήριον* for *μαρτύριον* than vice versa. In the early church, the term *μυστήριον* was far more commonly used for the gospel than was *μαρτύριον* (G. Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles: A Disquisition upon the Corpus Paulinum* [London: Oxford University Press, 1953], 101; Gordon D. Fee, “1 Corinthians 1:2, 2:1, and 2:10,” in *Scribes and Scripture: New Testament Essays in Honor of J. Harold Greenlee* [ed. David Alan Black; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992], 6–7.)

from God for us. The most likely conclusion, therefore, is that the wisdom, which is spoken in a mystery, is the message of the death of Christ, or more comprehensively, the gospel regarding Christ (cf. 1:17a; Rom 1:16).²³ This interpretation gains further confirmation when the term *μυστήριον* recurs in the plural in 4:1, apparently as a reference to the gospel or God's plan of salvation.²⁴

This wisdom is not an advanced Christian teaching, therefore, such as a special message concerning eschatology. The future glory of the Christian is the goal of the wisdom, not its content. This corresponds to a telic force of the preposition *εἰς* in the phrase *εἰς δόξαν ἡμῶν* (2:7b). Sometimes it is suggested that the phrase "that which God has prepared for those who love him" (2:9) indicates that the mystery is about eschatology, about the eternal inheritance for believers.²⁵ This phrase, however, gives a description of what the rulers of this world did not know (2:8). They are later contrasted with "us," who have

²³ Peter Stuhlmacher, "The Hermeneutical Significance of 1 Corinthians 2:6-16," in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament: Essays in Honor of E. Earle Ellis for His 60th Birthday* (ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Otto Betz; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 334; Fee, *First Epistle*, 105-6; Schrage, *Erste Brief*, 227, 250-51.

²⁴ C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (2d ed.; BNTC; London: Black, 1992), 100; Fee, *First Epistle*, 160; Schrage, *Erste Brief*, 321.

²⁵ Based on the force of 1 Cor 2:9, Markus Bockmuehl concludes that the content of the hidden wisdom is "a deeper knowledge of the inheritance which is in store for those who love God" (*Revelation and Mystery*, 162-64). Similarly, Birger A. Pearson, *The Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology in 1 Corinthians: A Study in the Theology of the Corinthian Opponents of Paul and Its Relation to Gnosticism* (SBLDS 12; Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), 34-35. Robin Scroggs argues that the mystery is a teaching that Paul reserves for mature Christians, which is kept secret to the Corinthians since they are only immature, not mature ("Paul: Σοφος and πνευματικός," *NTS* 14 [1967-68]: 44-48). Based on the use of the term *μυστήριον* in apocalyptic literature and in Rom 11:25; 1 Cor 15:51, he identifies this secret mystery as Paul's teaching regarding eschatology. As a further argument for this interpretation, there are important parallels in apocalyptic literature to the idea of a limited revelation of the mystery of God. In *1 En.* 104:12 the fact that the wise people will be given the Scriptures is called a mystery, and *2 En.* 24:3 relates that the mystery is not revealed to the angels. Fourth Ezra teaches that the mystery is revealed only to the wise (12:34-38; 14:26, 46-48), but there the idea of a limited revelation is related to the merit theology of that book (10:38-39; 12:36). Moreover, Paul understands the mystery as hidden in a way radically different from the way it is understood in the apocalyptic literature (and by Scroggs). The mystery is not kept secret, but openly proclaimed (see below). It still remains hidden to some people, however. Furthermore, Scroggs ignores the identification of the wisdom of God with the word of the cross (2:8). It was not ignorance regarding Paul's secret teaching of the end of days that led the rulers of this world to take Jesus to the cross. Rather, it was the importance of the person of Jesus and the importance of his work, in Pauline terminology: the gospel or the word of the cross.

Several scholars have espoused a comprehensive understanding of the content of the mystery, so that it includes Paul's teaching regarding eschatology. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term 'Mystery' in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 41; Wilckens, "Zu 1 Kor 2,1-16," 510; Merklein, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther: Kapitel 1-4*, 229, 234. See also Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3* (AB 34; New York: Doubleday, 1974), 125-26.

received the spirit of God, “so that we know that which is given us from God” (2:12). The best contextual clue to what it is that “is given us from God” is found in 1:30, where Christ Jesus is referred to as God’s gift. That Christ is the beforehand planned gift of God to his people (cf. 2:9) would also be the interpretation that fits best with Paul’s teaching elsewhere. When he writes about something that is predetermined by God, it is usually the elect themselves (Rom 8:29–30; 9:23; 11:2; Eph 1:5) or the gospel of Christ (Rom 1:1–3; Gal 3:8; Eph 1:9–10).

III. Hiddenness and Revelation

This divine wisdom, which is hidden in a mystery,²⁶ is revealed by the Holy Spirit (2:10, 12). That the mysteries of divine wisdom must be revealed is a concept that is known from Jewish wisdom literature (Wis 6:22–24). Divine wisdom is also said to reveal mysteries (Sir 4:18; Wis 7:21–22). More closely related are the passages in Daniel where secrets are revealed to the prophet (Dan 2:19–23),²⁷ not by virtue of his superior wisdom (Dan 2:30), but because the Holy Spirit is in him (Dan 4:6).

The connection with Daniel prompts the question of whether Paul has a particular experience in view. Possibly Paul has in mind his experience on the road to Damascus,²⁸ but there is no clear reference to that event in this context. Neither does the quotation from the Scriptures (v. 9) betray the source of the revelation.²⁹ The function of this quotation is to explain the concept of hiddenness, not that of revelation. What Paul is concerned to point out in the following verses is that appropriation of divine wisdom requires a special ability. Natural human beings lack this ability (2:14), which is an exclusive attribute of the spirit of God (2:11b). Therefore, only those who have been given this spirit can understand God’s wisdom (2:12). Paul’s mention of revelation seems to be a

²⁶ The prepositional phrase in 2:7, ἐν μυστηρίῳ, can be taken either with λαλοῦμεν or with θεοῦ σοφίαν. The latter is in line with how Paul’s argument runs in this passage (E. B. Allo, *Saint Paul: Première Épître aux Corinthiens* [2d ed.; EBib; Paris: Gabalda, 1934], 41; Karl Prümmer, “Mystères,” *DBSup* 6:193; Fee, *First Epistle*, 104–5; Schrage, *Erste Brief*, 251).

²⁷ H. H. Drake Williams III, *The Wisdom of the Wise: The Presence and Function of Scripture Within 1 Cor. 1:18–3:23* (AGJU 49; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 166–68.

²⁸ Seyoon Kim points out that it was on this occasion that Paul changed from viewing the crucified Christ as a σκάνδαλον to viewing him as the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:23; Gal 3:13), that the designation “Lord of glory” recalls Paul’s descriptions of how Christ appeared to him (1 Cor 9:1; 2 Cor 3:18; 4:4–6; Gal 1:16), and that in parallel mystery passages in Col 1:23c–29; Eph 3:1–13, an essential part of the mystery is the inclusion of the Gentiles, which in turn was the essence of the call Paul received when he met the risen Christ (Gal 1:16) (*The Origin of Paul’s Gospel* [WUNT 2/4; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1981], 78–82).

²⁹ Contra Gregory K. Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (JSNTSup 166; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 251–52.

general reference to the fact that knowledge of this mystery is given by revelation through the Holy Spirit, not by the use of human wisdom.

This is not a matter of a revelation of things otherwise unheard of, but of the ability, by means of what is called revelation, to appropriate what is preached openly. In 1 Cor 1:23 it is clearly seen that this wisdom of God is preached to all, to those who are saved as well as to those who perish.³⁰ Apparently, this wisdom had also been announced to the rulers of the world, but they failed to apprehend it. Had they done so, they would not have crucified Christ (2:8). When Paul says that wisdom is spoken among the perfect (2:6), the meaning must be that what is spoken is only received as wisdom by the perfect. This concept of revelation finds its closest parallel in Eph 1:17:³¹ “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit³² of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.” The kind of revelation that is spoken of here is related to a condition of the heart (Eph 1:18).³³ The heart that is rightly disposed toward the Lord receives this revelation.

Some scholars maintain that there is also a reference to redemptive history here. The thought would then be that the mystery was previously hidden but is now revealed as a consequence of the Christ-event. The “us” of v. 10 would then refer to the generations after the revelation in Jesus Christ.³⁴ It is unlikely,

³⁰ Prümm, “Mystères,” 190, 198; A. E. Harvey, “The Use of Mystery Language in the Bible,” *JTS* 31 (1980): 330; Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 160.

³¹ The position adopted in this essay is that of Pauline authorship of Ephesians. See Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Epheser: Ein Kommentar* (3d ed.; Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1962), 22–28; A. Van Roon, *The Authenticity of Ephesians* (NovTSup 39; Leiden: Brill, 1974), 11–29; M. D. Goulder, “The Visionaries of Laodicea,” *JSNT* 43 (1991): 15–39; D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 305–9; Stanley E. Porter and Kent D. Clarke, “Canonical-Critical Perspective and the Relationship of Colossians and Ephesians,” *Bib* 78 (1997): 78–81; Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 4–41.

³² A reference to the Holy Spirit is probably intended (Joachim Gnilka, *Der Epheserbrief* [HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1971], 90; Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, 148; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* [WBC 42; Dallas: Word, 1990], 57; Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* [ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1998], 163; O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 132), as in 1 Cor 2:10.

³³ There is a debate among commentators about whether there is a reference to baptism here. At any rate, a personal transformation is in view (Gnilka, *Epheserbrief*, 91; Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, 148, 150; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Ephesians: A Commentary* [3d ed.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991], 74–75; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 58; O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 134).

³⁴ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (2d ed.; ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1914), 43; Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1952), 1:106; Nils Alstrup Dahl, “Formgeschichtliche Beobachtungen zur Christusverkündigung in der Gemeindepredigt,” in *Neutestamentliche Studien für Rudolf Bultmann zu seinem siebenzigsten Geburtstag am 20. August 1954* (BZNW 21; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1954), 4; Brown, *Semitic Background*, 49; Barrett, *First Epistle*, 71; Fee, *First Epistle*, 105. Hans Conzelmann refers to this idea as the *Revelationsschema*, which he finds fully developed in the Deutero-Pauline letters. A *Zwischenstufe* can be observed in

however, that any such reference is intended here. The contrast is not between the present and the past but between that which is from God and that which is of the flesh. Note how the two different systems of power and wisdom are designated by Paul: on the one hand, “of this age” (1:20; 2:6, 8), “of the world” (1:20, 21, 27, 28; 2:12), “according to the flesh” (1:26, 29), “of human beings” (1:25; 2:5, 13), and on the other hand, “of God” (1:21, 24, 25; 2:1, 7, 12), “of the Spirit” (2:10, 13, 14), and “of Christ” (2:16). These designations clearly point toward a fundamental dualism between that which is without God and that which belongs to God, rather than to a dualism between the before and the now.³⁵ Moreover, the “us” of v. 10 recalls the “we” of v. 6, who speak wisdom among the perfect. In the immediate context this group is contrasted with “the rulers of this age,”³⁶ who were responsible for the crucifixion of the Lord.³⁷ The opposing groups in question both have the privilege of living in the decisive age in redemptive history, but only one of the groups has received divine revelation through the Spirit. As recipients of divine revelation, the “us” of v. 10 are identified as an elect group, and, in the larger context, this picks up the motif of the divine calling and election of 1:24–28. This elect group is set over against those who appear to be wise, mighty, of noble descent, and powerful according to the standards of this world, not over against a group of any other period. Paul teaches a reversal of values that is made manifest through divine revelation.

Certainly, there is ample evidence for connecting the term “mystery” with the idea of a divine plan that was previously hidden but has been revealed at the coming of Christ (Rom 16:25–26; Eph 3:4–5, 9–10; Col 1:26–27). But this seems to be a later development of the term. There is no certain evidence of this connotation in the early Pauline letters.³⁸

1 Corinthians (*Der erste Brief and die Korinther* [KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969], 80). Chantal Reynier points out the parallels to Rom 16:25–26 and Col 1:26, but concedes that the pattern of temporality that he finds in those verses is not so clearly manifest in this passage (*Évangile et mystère: Les enjeux théologiques de l'épître aux Éphésiens* [LD 149; Paris: Cerf, 1992], 142). Walter Grundmann further notes the parallel to the immature in Gal 3:23–4:11 and observes that the coming of Christ brings humanity to maturity (“Die $\nu\eta\pi\tau\omicron\tau$ in der urchristlichen Paränese,” *NTS* 5 [1958–59]: 190–91). But the fact that the metaphor in Gal 3:23–4:11 is the same does not necessarily mean that the referent is the same. While in 1 Cor 3:1–3 the characterization of the Corinthians as immature is used as a rebuke, in Gal 3:23–4:11 it is not implied that those who were immature before the coming of Christ are to be scolded. It is unwarranted to see a reference to the progress of redemptive history based on the fact that the same metaphor is used as in Gal 3:23–4:11.

³⁵ Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation*, 175.

³⁶ See n. 20 above.

³⁷ Fee explains that the mystery “remains hidden” from the rulers of this world (*First Epistle*, 105). But the inference of the categories “hidden from all,” “revealed to some,” and “hidden from others” is based on eisegesis.

³⁸ Wolter, “Verborgene Weisheit,” 305; Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 209.

The time marker “before the ages” (v. 7b) refers not to a time when the divine wisdom was hidden (as is the case in Rom 16:25; Eph 3:9) but to a time when it was being prepared.³⁹ Nor does this time marker refer to past history, as in the parallel expression in Eph 3:9. In Eph 3:9 the preposition is ἀπό, which can refer to past ages, but here the preposition is πρό, which has to be translated “before the ages,” that is, referring to eternity, as it does in the only NT parallel, Jude 25.

A different “redemption historical” view has been proposed by James A. Davis. He maintains that Paul in this passage sets divine wisdom against the wisdom of the Torah.⁴⁰ The negative descriptions in 1:26–29 refer to the Jews, who seek wisdom in the Torah. With the coming of Christ the law is set aside as something that belonged to an earlier period.⁴¹

There are several problems with this interpretation, however. It is remarkable that Paul would call the wisdom of the Torah a wisdom of this age and a wisdom of the world.⁴² Davis thinks that the Torah can be identified with the wisdom of this age because it was designed for a prior world order. As we have seen, however, the force of Paul’s argument is not that this wisdom is of the *prior* world order but of *this* world order. The close association of the wisdom of the law with the flesh that this interpretation implies (1:26) is also problematic. In Rom 7:7–25 it is pointed out how the law can function as an opportunity for sin (vv. 7, 11), but Paul takes care to guard against a flat identification of the law and the flesh (v. 14). If Paul in 1 Cor 1:26 were saying that the wisdom of the law is a wisdom of the flesh, we would expect a modification similar to that in Rom 7:14. True, Paul may call a confidence in the righteousness of the law a confidence in the flesh (Phil 3:4, 6), but he never makes a similar statement regarding the wisdom of the law. It is intrinsically unlikely that he would do so, while insisting that the gospel he preached was found in the Torah (Rom 3:21b, 31; Gal 3:8; 4:21).⁴³

³⁹ Similarly Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 242; contra Reynier, *Évangile et mystère*, 142.

⁴⁰ James A. Davis, *Wisdom and Spirit: An Investigation of 1 Corinthians 1.18–3.20 Against the Background of Jewish Sapiential Traditions in the Greco-Roman Period* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 89. Similarly Stuhlmacher, “Hermeneutical Significance,” 341. Angela Standhartinger has proposed that the wisdom in 1 Cor 1:17–3:4 should be understood against the background of *Joseph and Aseneth*. As Joseph, to whom wisdom is attributed (*Jos. Asen.* 4:7; 13:14–15), is given to Aseneth (*Jos. Asen.* 15.6), so the crucified Christ, the divine wisdom, is given to the church (Standhartinger, “Weisheit,” 496). The parallel is very remote at best. The wedding motif, essential in *Joseph and Aseneth*, is missing from 1 Corinthians.

⁴¹ Davis, *Wisdom and Spirit*, 72–73, 77–78, 94.

⁴² Litfin, *St. Paul’s Theology of Proclamation*, 206.

⁴³ Davis observes that the terms used for the rejected wise persons (1:20) could be taken to refer to Jewish scribes and wise persons. Even though this may be correct, it shows only that Paul is polemical toward contemporary Jewish wisdom; it does not say why. Martin Hengel, one of the scholars on whom Davis relies, observes that the predicates given to Christ in 1 Cor 1:30—wisdom,

Michael Goulder has attempted to revive F. C. Baur's hypothesis that 1 Corinthians reflects the conflict between the Petrine and Pauline forms of Christianity. According to this view, the false wisdom is the *halakic* interpretation of the Torah, and Paul's reply is that one should "not go beyond what is written" (4:6), a case in point being the kosher laws discussed in chs. 8–10.⁴⁴ The advantages over James A. Davis's interpretation are obvious. It would be in keeping with Paul's teaching elsewhere to identify a particular Jewish approach to the law, not the Torah as such, with the flesh and *this* world order, as opposed to that which comes from God. A main obstacle to this interpretation too, however, is that it can only poorly account for the licentiousness Paul addresses in Corinth (chs. 5–7).⁴⁵ It is also doubtful that Paul's opponents would concede that their *halakic* interpretation of the Torah was merely "words taught by human wisdom" (2:13), as these rulings were clearly understood to be established by divine authority.

Containing no likely reference to redemptive history, the connotations of the term "mystery" in this context are therefore best understood as being something that is inaccessible. The hidden wisdom, which is the word of the cross, appears to the wise person of this world as weakness and foolishness. Although it is proclaimed openly, it remains hidden from those who want to be wise according to the standards of this world.⁴⁶ One can come to know this wisdom only if one abandons any claim to what is regarded as credentials in this world (1 Cor 3:18; cf. 1:26–29) and appropriates for oneself the reversal of values that characterizes the message of the cross. This is the paradoxical nature of the gospel.⁴⁷

righteousness, sanctification, and redemption—correspond to the salvific gifts that a pious Jew would ascribe to the Torah (*The Son of God* [London: SCM, 1976], 74). This observation can equally well be related to the idea that Paul believed that the effect of his message was that the law was fulfilled (Rom 3:31; 8:4). William Baird (review of *Wisdom and Spirit: An Investigation of 1 Corinthians 1:18–3:20 Against the Background of Jewish Sapiential Traditions in the Greco-Roman Period* by James A. Davis, *JBL* 106 [1987]: 150–51) also points out that Davis's study lacks any serious attempt at understanding 1 Corinthians in its historical context and that his hypothesis cannot explain the practices Paul goes on to address in chs. 5–10.

⁴⁴ Michael D. Goulder, "ΣΟΦΙΑ in 1 Corinthians," *NTS* 37 (1991): 516–21. Cf. C. K. Barrett, who identifies a Peter-party but also stresses the difference between a party who claimed allegiance to Peter and Peter himself ("Cephas and Corinth," in *Essays on Paul* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982], 33, 37).

⁴⁵ Richard Hays, "The Conversion of the Imagination: Scripture and Eschatology in 1 Corinthians," *NTS* 45 (1999): 397.

⁴⁶ Wolter, "Verborgene Weisheit," 304; Romano Penna, "The Wisdom of the Cross and Its Foolishness as Foundation of the Church," in *Wisdom and Folly of the Cross*, vol. 2 of *Paul the Apostle: A Theological and Exegetical Study* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 54–55.

⁴⁷ Gerhard Sellin, "Das 'Geheimnis' der Weisheit und das Rätsel der 'Christuspartei' (zu 1 Kor 1–4)," *ZNW* 73 (1982): 81, 89–90; Stuhlmacher, "Hermeneutical Significance," 339–40; Reynier, *Évangile et mystère*, 154–55; Merklein, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther: Kapitel 1–4*, 228;

IV. Who Are the Perfect?

The wisdom that is in a mystery is something Paul speaks among the perfect.⁴⁸ Who are these? Did Paul count the Corinthians among the perfect? Another way of putting this question is whether all Christians,⁴⁹ or only some of them,⁵⁰ are counted among the perfect or the spiritual (πνευματικός), which is used synonymously.

The antithesis between πνευματικός and ψυχικός is puzzling, as Paul's usual antonym for πνευματικός is σάρκινος. Much energy has been expended explaining the background for this terminology. The previously popular view that this terminology reflects early Gnosticism has generally been abandoned.⁵¹

Jean-Noël Aletti, "Sagesse et Mystère chez Paul: Réflexions sur le rapprochement de deux champs lexicographiques," in *La Sagesse Biblique: De l'Ancien au Nouveau Testament* (ed. Jacques Trublet; LD 160; Paris: Cerf, 1995), 366–67; Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 231, 241; Standhartinger, "Weisheit," 494. Dismissing the older assumption that the Corinthians held to an "over-realized eschatology," E. Earle Ellis correctly observes that the Corinthians had a misguided conception of how the believer shared in the glory of Christ ("Christ Crucified," in *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* [1974; WUNT 18; reprint, Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1978], 78; similarly Wilckens, *Weisheit und Torheit*, 20). They thought that they already in this life should experience their participation in the resurrection. Paul shows them, however, that a true apprehension of God's wisdom manifested itself in a sharing in the crucifixion of Christ in this life. Thus, a true apprehension of the wisdom of God manifested itself in what for the world appeared as weakness and foolishness.

⁴⁸ Τέλειος is variously translated. The basic idea of its Hebrew equivalent, כִּמְלֵךְ, is that of wholeness and completeness (B. Kedar-Kopfstein, "כִּמְלֵךְ," TWAT 8:691), a meaning that also can be observed in the Greek τέλειος (cf. 1 Cor 13:10). In opposition to νήπιος, it is used with the meaning "mature," the thought being that of someone who is fully grown. When used in an ethical sense it has the connotations of integrity and undividedness (Gerhard Dellling, "τέλος κτλ.," TDNT 8:67–77).

⁴⁹ Günther Bornkamm, "μυστήριον κτλ.," TDNT 4:819; P. J. Du Plessis, TEAEIOS: *The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 1959), 184; Martin Winter, *Pneumatiker und Psychiker in Korinth: Zum religionsgeschichtlichen Hintergrund von 1. Kor. 2,6–3,4* (Marburger Theologische Studien 12; Marburg: Elwert, 1975), 214; Fee, *First Epistle*, 100–103; Johnson, "Wisdom of God," 142; Schrage, *Erste Brief*, 249; Merklein, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther: Kapitel 1–4*, 225, 234; Christian Wolff, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther* (THKNT 8; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1996), 54; Collins, *First Corinthians*, 129; Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 233, 267–68.

⁵⁰ Allo, *Première Épître aux Corinthiens*, 40; Hugo Odeberg, *Pauli brev till korintierna* (Tolkning av Nya Testamentet 7; Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelsens Bokförlag, 1944), 66; Wilckens, *Weisheit und Torheit*, 53; Rudolf Schmackenburger, "Christian Adulthood According to the Apostle Paul," *CBQ* 25 (1963): 357–58; Margaret E. Thrall, *The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 24; Scroggs, "Paul," 44–48; Brown, *Semitic Background*, 42; Stuhlmacher, "Hermeneutical Significance," 334; Theissen, *Psychological Aspects*, 352; Barrett, *First Epistle*, 69; Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 126; Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 164–65; Standhartinger, "Weisheit," 496. These scholars typically stress that insight into the wisdom that only the perfect can apprehend is potentially available to all Christians since they have received the Spirit. Similarly Karl Prümm, who stresses that the appropriation of the mystery is gradual ("Mystères," 191, 197–98).

⁵¹ Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth*, 138; Winter, *Pneumatiker und Psychiker*, 210, 230;

Instead it has become more common, alongside the tendency to find roots of later full-blown Gnosticism in Hellenistic Judaism, to look for the background for this terminology in a Hellenistic-Jewish context.⁵² More specifically, it is often considered to be dependent on the Hellenistic-Jewish exegesis of Gen 2:7. Philo finds here a contrast between the heavenly person and the earthly person. His terminology is somewhat confusing, but may be summarized as follows: In Gen 1:26–27 Philo sees the creation of the heavenly, immortal part of the soul, the *νοῦς*, created, or rather breathed, by God, according to the image of the Logos. In Gen 2:7, however, the heavenly part was joined with the earthly, mortal part, the *σῶμα* (*Opif.* 134–35; *Leg.* 3.161; *Somn.* 1.34; *Her.* 56). This dichotomy can in turn be seen to correspond to two different types of human beings, the heavenly and the earthly (*Leg.* 1.31–32), one that lives by reason, by the divine spirit (*θεῖῳ πνεύματι*), and one that lives by blood and the pleasures of the flesh (*Her.* 57).⁵³ Against the Corinthian understanding of spirituality as a nature given by God, Paul presumably emphasizes that true spiritu-

John Painter, “Paul and the *πνευματικοί* at Corinth,” in *Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honor of C. K. Barrett* (ed. M. D. Hooker and S. G. Wilson; London: SPCK, 1982), 245; Theissen, *Psychological Aspects*, 353–54. Wilckens, in his earlier work, concluded that in 1 Cor 2:6–16 Paul had adapted to the terminology of his Gnostic opponents to such a degree that he had betrayed his own theology (*Weisheit und Torheit*, 60), but Wilckens later abandoned this position (“Zu 1 Kor 2,1–16,” 524–26, 529). The hypothesis of Gnostic terminology has been taken up by Schrage, who, anachronistically, assumes that Paul has been influenced by the language of the Nag Hammadi writings (*Erste Brief*, 263).

⁵² See C. K. Barrett, “Christianity at Corinth,” in *Essays on Paul*, 12, 24; R. McL. Wilson, “Gnosis at Corinth,” in *Paul and Paulinism*, ed. Hooker and Wilson, 110–12.

⁵³ Pearson, *Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology*, 17–21; Richard A. Horsley, “Pneumatikos Vs. Psychikos: Distinctions of Spiritual Status Among the Corinthians,” *HTR* 69 (1976): 275–78; idem, “Wisdom of Word and Words of Wisdom in Corinth,” *CBQ* 39 (1977): 233; Wilckens, “Zu 1 Kor 2,1–16,” 531; Gregory E. Sterling, “‘Wisdom Among the Perfect’: Creation Traditions in Alexandrian Judaism and Corinthian Christianity,” *NovT* 37 (1995): 362–65; Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 268–69. It is maintained that in 1 Cor 15:42–49 Paul gives his alternative interpretation of Gen 2:7. Over against the Philonic interpretation Paul stresses that the earthly person Adam in time is the primary, and the heavenly person, who is Christ, in time is the secondary. Moreover, he rejects the idea of two parts of human beings as created by God. Thus, Paul overturns the Corinthians’ idea of spiritual existence as something attainable for human beings by cultivating the heavenly part of himself, and he replaces it with a dualism between “the present age” and “the age to come” (Pearson, *Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology*, 24–26; Horsley, “Pneumatikos Vs. Psychikos,” 274; Wilckens, “Zu 1 Kor 2,1–16,” 532; Sterling, “‘Wisdom Among the Perfect,’” 360–61). It is unlikely that in 1 Cor 15:42–49 Paul is concerned to combat the Philonic interpretation of Gen 2:7, however. Paul insists that the natural (*ψυχικός*) person was the first and the spiritual (*πνευματικός*) person was the second, but Philo does not see any temporal sequence in the creation account; rather it presents a logical order. Hence, there is no temporal priority of the heavenly person over the first actual person in the Philonic interpretation of Gen 1:26–27; 2:7. Neither is there any contrast between the heavenly person and the first actual person (Robin Scroggs, *The Last Adam: A Study in Pauline Anthropology* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966], 120–22).

ality is not something inherent in human beings, but something that must be given by the Holy Spirit.⁵⁴

The explanatory value of this reconstruction of the theology of Paul's opponents is very sparse, however. As we have seen, the problem that Paul is concerned with here is the tendency among the Corinthian Christians to evaluate their teachers by the standards of rhetoric. There is no need to identify a deliberately anti-Pauline teaching in Corinth. Neither is the Philo-hypothesis really helpful in explaining the specific πνευματικός-ψυχικός terminology, as this contrast does not occur in Philo. Nor does Philo ever use the term πνευματικός for the heavenly part of human beings or this kind of human being.⁵⁵ Richard A. Horsley, who is one of the main proponents for this hypothesis, is forced to conjecture that this terminology originated among the Corinthians themselves and that they associated it with the Philonic distinction between the heavenly and the earthly person.⁵⁶

It must be admitted, however, that Paul's choice of the term ψυχικός is somewhat mysterious.⁵⁷ The term ψυχικός is relatively rare in first-century Greek, but in all its NT occurrences it denotes something in absolute antithesis to that which is of God and God's spirit (1 Cor 15:44, 46; Jas 3:15; Jude 19). It is possible that Paul chose this term in this context in order to denote a more absolute opposition to πνευματικός than what he intended with the word σάρκινος/σαρκικός (see our discussion of 3:1–4 below).

The way Paul's argument runs in 1 Cor 1–3 leads us to think that the "perfect" must be identified with all believers. We have seen that the content of wisdom is the gospel and that the revelation of this wisdom comes about by the Holy Spirit through a reversal of values on the recipient's part: that which appears to be foolishness is acknowledged as divine wisdom. The "perfect," those who appropriate this wisdom (2:6), seem to be all those who accept the gospel, all Christians.

⁵⁴ Egon Brandenburger, *Fleisch und Geist: Paulus und die dualistische Weisheit* (WMANT 29; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1968), 135; Pearson, *Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology*, 38–39; Wilckens, "Zu 1 Kor 2,1–16," 515; Sterling, "Wisdom Among the Perfect," 371–72. Similarly Joachim Theis, *Paulus als Weisheitslehrer: Der Gekreuzigte und die Weisheit in 1 Kor 1–4* (BU 22; Regensburg: Pustet, 1991), 497.

⁵⁵ According to a search in the TLG data base. See Horsley, "Pneumatikos Vs. Psychikos," 271.

⁵⁶ Horsley, "Pneumatikos Vs. Psychikos," 284.

⁵⁷ According to a search in the TLG data base there is no parallel in contemporary literature to the contrast between persons who are ψυχικοί and πνευματικοί. Fee suggests that Paul's use of πνευματικός is based on the LXX use of ψυχή for "natural human being" (*First Epistle*, 116; cf. Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 267). In accordance with his tendency to support simultaneously almost all hypotheses regarding the background for Paul's terminology in 1 Cor 2, Thiselton also suggests that Stoic terminology may have influenced Paul, but he does not provide any evidence that shows why ψυχικός would be an apt term as an antonym for πνευματικός (*First Epistle*, 270).

The recipients of the revelation, ἡμῖν δέ of 2:10, which refers to the same group as the immediately preceding τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν αὐτόν (v. 9), must be taken as an inclusive reference, with which Paul also intends the Corinthians.⁵⁸ The perfect are also called the spiritual, those who have received the spirit of God (v. 12), and these understand that which comes from God. The opposite of being a πνευματικός is being a ψυχικός, which means to be unreceptive to what comes from the spirit of God.

The antithesis that has been prominent all the way since 1:18 is that between the believers and those who are lost:⁵⁹

- “those who are saved” vs. “those who are lost” (1:18)
- “those who believe” vs. “Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom” (1:21–22)
- “those who are called” vs. “the wise” (1:24, 27)
- “the perfect” vs. “the rulers” (2:6)
- “for our glory” vs. “those who perish” (2:7, 6)
- “to us God has revealed” vs. “none of the rulers of this world knew” (2:10, 8)
- “those who love him” vs. “they crucified the lord of glory” (2:9, 8)
- “the Spirit that is from God” vs. “the spirit of the world” (2:12)
- “spiritual” vs. “natural human being” (2:15, 14)
- “the mind of Christ” vs. “foolishness for them” (2:16, 14)

An identification of the perfect with all those who have come to faith in Christ would correspond to a Jewish background for the term τέλειος. In the OT (Gen 6:9; 2 Sam 22:24; Job 1:1; Ps 15:2; 18:24; Prov 11:5), as well as in Qumran (1QS 2:2; 4:22; 1QH 9:36) and in Jewish wisdom literature (Sir 39:24; 44:17), תמים is used for someone who is righteous.⁶⁰ The Qumran literature also attests to the thought that divine wisdom was a prerogative of the Qumran group (1QS 4:22; 9:18; 11:6–7; 1QH 10:13–14; 20:11–12).

As weighty evidence for not taking the Corinthians as being among the perfect, however, we note that they are referred to as fleshly and immature in

⁵⁸ Schrage, *Erste Brief*, 256; Merklein, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther: Kapitel 1–4*, 234; Wolff, *Erste Brief*, 58. Allo concedes that the ἡμῖν δέ must be taken inclusively and refer to all Christians but maintains that in v.13 Paul goes on to talk about a limited group, the perfect and spiritual (*Première Épître aux Corinthiens*, 45). This distinction is untenable. The object of revelation in v. 10 must be the wisdom of vv. 6–10, the wisdom spoken among the perfect (v. 6).

⁵⁹ Plessis, ΤΕΛΕΙΟΣ, 179.

⁶⁰ Kedar-Kopfstein, “תמים,” 696, 700; R. B. Y. Scott, “Wise and Foolish, Righteous and Wicked,” in *Studies in the Religion of Ancient Israel* (VTSup 23; Leiden: Brill, 1972), 160–61. Scott notes, however, that even though there is an absolute distinction in wisdom literature between the righteous (צדק, which is a correlate of תמים) and the wicked, the acquisition of wisdom is understood more as a gradual process.

3:1–4. The contrast between the τέλειος and the νήπιος is well attested.⁶¹ Paul says that he had to speak to the Corinthians as fleshly and that he could not speak to them as spiritual, which is a precondition for understanding the wisdom that comes from God (2:13–15).

Paul's use of the term τέλειος in other contexts also seems to militate against taking the term as a referent for the Corinthians. Τέλειος usually refers to a state that is seen as a goal for believers. Apart from here, this adjective is used seven times in the canonical Pauline letters, five times referring to the believers or the church as a whole. In four of those instances it seems to describe a state not yet fully achieved: The Corinthians are urged to strive for perfection in understanding (1 Cor 14:2, where τέλειος also is set over against νήπιος). The goal of the different ministries in the church is to establish the church as a perfect person (Eph 4:13). It is the goal of the teaching of Paul to present every person perfect in Christ (Col 1:28), and Epaphras prays that the Colossians will stay perfect (Col 4:12). In the fifth instance, Paul encourages those who are perfect to share his attitude in pressing toward the goal (Phil 3:15). The identification of "those who are perfect" is a major exegetical problem in Philippians. Observing that ὅσοι in Paul is commonly used inclusively (cf. Rom 6:3; 8:14; 2 Cor 1:20; Gal 3:27; 6:16), so as to refer to all (at least potentially), Peter T. O'Brien rightly concludes that "ὅσοι οὖν τέλειοι is open-ended: it does not assert that every believer at Philippi is 'mature,' but it leaves the way open for the 'conscientious judgment of every reader' whether he or she fits the description. Paul is skillfully seeking to draw all his readers into this group."⁶² This use of the term "perfect" also reflects the paradoxical nature of the gospel. Paul has just waived all claims of perfection for himself (3:12) and is now in effect saying that Christian perfection is bound up with the acknowledgment that one is lacking in perfection.⁶³

The parallel in Eph 4:13 is particularly interesting. The perfection is there linked with knowledge of the Son of God and unity in faith. Turning to Corinth,

⁶¹ Delling, τέλος, 69.

⁶² Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 436–37. Similarly Jean-François Collange, *The Epistle of Saint Paul to the Philippians* (London: Epworth, 1979), 135; Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 356; Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (BNTC; London: Black, 1998), 225–26.

⁶³ Francis W. Beare, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (2d ed.; BNTC; London: Black, 1969), 131; Ulrich B. Müller, *Der Brief des Paulus and die Philipper* (THKNT; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1993), 171. Paul's denial of his own perfection in 3:12 need not be understood as militating against taking ὅσοι inclusively (contra Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* [WBC 43; Waco: Word, 1983], 156; Wolfgang Schenk, *Die Philippenerbriefe des Paulus* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1984], 267).

we note that the believers there are scolded for their lack of unity; the church is characterized by schism and strife (1 Cor 3:3). These observations lead to the conclusion that the Corinthians, by virtue of their disunity, demonstrate that they are not among the perfect. Perfection, on the other hand, is a state toward which Christians should strive, an effort in which the Corinthians are regrettably lacking. The instance in Col 1:28 seems to confirm this conclusion.⁶⁴ In this passage as well, perfection is not a present reality for every Christian but rather an eschatological reality.⁶⁵ We note also that the concept of revelation in this passage parallels Eph 1:17, where the thought is of a gradual progress in insight.⁶⁶

These findings, then, seem to concur with the impression we get from Heb 5:11–6:3, where the author complains that the recipients of his letter still needed milk and could not take solid food, and therefore must be characterized as immature. The solid food, more advanced biblical teaching, is reserved for the perfect, that is, those who because of practice have trained their senses to distinguish (διάκρισιν, cf. συγκρίνοντες in 1 Cor 2:13 and ἀνακρίνει in 2:15) between good and evil.

1 Corinthians 3:1–4 is puzzling. Paul now says that the Corinthians are fleshly and walk in a human fashion. Although he introduces the terms νήπιος, a well-known antonym for τέλειος, and σάρκινος/σαρκικός, his own favorite antonym for πνευματικός, he does not recall the key negative term from 2:6–16, ψυχικός. Nor does he flatly deny that the Corinthians are spiritual, but

⁶⁴ For Pauline authorship of Colossians, see Werner G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 340–48; Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC 44; Waco: Word, 1982), xli–liv; Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction*, 331–34; Porter and Clarke, “Canonical-Critical Perspective,” 78–81; Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 178–79. Jean-Noël Aletti concludes that the letter “est très probablement de Paul” (*Saint Paul Épître aux Colossiens* [EBib 20; Paris: Gabalda, 1993], 22–30, 208–9, 277–80). See also John M. G. Barclay, who maintains that if Colossians were not by Paul it must have been from someone so close to him that it still is a “Pauline” letter (*Colossians and Philemon* [NTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997], 35). Similarly James D. G. Dunn, who thinks that Paul authorized Timothy to write the letter (*The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 38).

⁶⁵ O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 89–90; Murray J. Harris, *Colossians & Philemon* (Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 73; Dunn, *Epistles*, 126. Eduard Schweizer notes that the word *παρίστημι* can be used both for installation into office and presentation before God's judgment (*The Letter to the Colossians* [London: SPCK, 1976], 111). Some scholars understand this as a perfection attainable in the present life for which Christians are encouraged to aim (Eduard Lohse, *Die Briefe an die Kolosser und an Philemon* [2d ed.; KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977], 124–25; Joachim Gnllka, *Der Kolosserbrief* [HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1980], 104; Aletti, *Colossiens*, 146). If this interpretation is correct it would be in even better accordance with our general argument here, “perfection” being a goal for believers.

⁶⁶ Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, 150.

with strong censure he observes that he could not speak to them as such (3:1).⁶⁷ There seems to be a different perspective here. Whereas Paul in 2:6–16 thought in terms of an absolute dualism, in 3:1–4 the perspective is of a distinction between mature and immature Christians.⁶⁸ As the terminological links show, however, the absolute dualism is not forgotten. The maturity that Paul wants the Corinthians to reach is characterized by nothing else than a realization of the implications of the state they had already reached as Christians. Their value system and consequent behavior, however, are indicative of a lack of conformity with the gospel.

In an attempt to account for all the evidence,⁶⁹ our conclusion must run along similar lines as Peter T. O'Brien's interpretation of the τέλειοι in Phil 3:15 (see above). There seems to be an intentional ambiguity on Paul's part. Paul is challenging the Corinthians to define themselves in relation to his gospel. The wisdom he preaches appears as foolishness for those who pursue wisdom by the standards of sophistic rhetoric, but for the spiritual, or perfect, it is the wisdom of God. Where do the Corinthians fall down?

This interpretation seems to be confirmed by the two instances outside this context where Paul uses the term πνευματικός as an attribute of persons. In 1 Cor 14:37 and Gal 6:1 Paul implies that the qualities of the spiritual person are to be expected from every believer, but he still sees the need to encourage it. To be spiritual is thus at the same time a status bestowed upon every Christian and a goal for which every Christian must strive.

In 1 Cor 2:14–16 the Corinthians are challenged to show themselves as spiritual. This does not mean that Paul wants them to reach a state previously completely unknown to them. Rather, they are urged to make use of the gift they received when they came to faith in Christ. They received the spirit of God and became spiritual. Let them now show themselves as such. The effect of our interpretation is that one becomes perfect in the same way as one becomes a Christian: by accepting the word of the cross in faith, which amounts to a reversal of the values of the world.⁷⁰ To be spiritual, then, is to have apprehended the word of the cross in such a way that it has transformed the entire existence of

⁶⁷ Fee finds a Pauline irony here. Even though the Corinthians are among the perfect, Paul still has to talk to them as immature (*First Epistle*, 102–3). Similarly, J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980), 218; Johnson, "Wisdom of God," 143.

⁶⁸ Davis, *Wisdom and Spirit*, 125–30.

⁶⁹ Cf. Schrage, who speaks of a "doppelte Linienführung" (*Erste Brief*, 249). Schnackenburg observes concerning the Corinthians that "they are pneumatics and yet they are not" ("Christian Adulthood," 358).

⁷⁰ Similarly Delling, "τέλος," 76; Barrett, *First Epistle*, 69; and Pearson, who observes that anyone who has received the gift of the spirit can be called spiritual, but that the full realization of this existence still lies in the future (*Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology*, 41).

the believer into its image—to a cruciform life, a life characterized by self-sacrificing love, and where power is manifest through weakness.⁷¹

By expecting of the Christian preachers that they excel by means of sophistic rhetoric, the Corinthians side with the rulers of this world and thus put themselves in a position where they are unable to receive the gospel. Hence, Paul cannot speak to them as spiritual, but he has to speak to them as fleshly and immature. They are in danger of forfeiting the divine gift they have received.⁷²

V. Conclusion

We have seen that, although there is no identifiable heterodox teaching Paul is combating in 1 Cor 1–4, his evaluation of the schisms is profoundly theological. The factionalism is rooted in a misapprehension of the gospel. Instead of having their self-identity in the word of the cross, the Corinthians rely on a kind of rhetoric that was supposed to allow them to excel in personal status, to the detriment of others. This is a characteristic of worldly wisdom, which stands in an antithetical relationship to God's wisdom. Divine wisdom, identified with the gospel, remains hidden under its apparent foolishness for those who want to be wise according to the standards of this world, even though it is proclaimed openly. By pursuing worldly status, the Corinthians are running the risk of defining themselves among those for whom the gospel is hidden and thus forfeiting the divine gift. The divisions are therefore indicative of the fact that the Corinthians are jeopardizing their salvation. Paul has to challenge them to show themselves as what they already are, as spiritual. Only as such can they apprehend divine wisdom. Paul therefore renews the call to abandon all claims to what is impressive in this world and rather to identify with the cross of Christ, in self-sacrificing love, and with the power of God, which is manifest in weakness. The fruit of this will be the unity of the church.

⁷¹ Aída Besançon Spencer and William David Spencer, "The Truly Spiritual in Paul: Biblical Background Paper on 1 Corinthians 2:6–16," in *Conflict and Context: Hermeneutics in the Americas* (ed. Mark Lau Branson and C. René Padilla; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 245–48.

⁷² Similarly Wilckens, "Zu 1 Kor 2,1–16," 511–13; C. C. Newman, *Paul's Glory Christology: Tradition and Rhetoric* (NovTSup 69; Leiden: Brill, 1992), 239; Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 247.