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. 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 σκίνα 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]: 57, 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 Ethics 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

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manifold. 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. His rejection of persuasive words of wisdom in 2:4, and a number of the terms employed in this context, such as πειθός, ἀποδείξεως, δύναμις, τέλειος5 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 καύχ- group occur with significantly increased frequency in the Corinthian letters (36

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).


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). 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.

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. It could be such a rivalry that is reflected in 1 Cor 1:12; 3:1–4. 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. Paul refused to provide such a display. 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
on this antithesis in 1:18–3:23. 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. In 1:19–31 Paul explains how God has turned the values of the world upside down. 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.” If the Corinthians could apprehend this divine standard, there would be no basis for the factionalism. In fact, their evaluation of their...
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

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 

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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. Farner, 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).
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

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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 μαρτυρίον 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 μαρτυρίον (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 μαρτυρίον τοῦ θεοῦ and μαρτυρίον τοῦ Χριστοῦ. The best way to explain all the data is to take μαρτυρίον τοῦ Χριστοῦ as original in 1:6 and μαρτυρίον in 2:1. The variant μαρτυρίον τοῦ θεοῦ in 1:6 is then explained as an adaption to the μαρτυρίον τοῦ θεοῦ in 2:1. The variant μαρτυρίον is explained as an adaption to the μαρτυρίον in 2:7. If, on the other hand, μαρτυρίον is considered original in 2:1, there is no adequate way of accounting for the other variants. Bruce M. Metzger insists that μαρτυρίον in 2:1 is a copyist’s error through a recollection of 1:6, but then he cannot explain how the reading μαρτυρίον τοῦ θεοῦ originated in 1:6 (A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament [2d ed.; Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1975], 545). Moreover, reading μαρτυρίον 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 μαρτυρίον for μαρτυρίον than vice versa. In the early church, the term μαρτυρίον was far more commonly used for the gospel than was μαρτυρίον (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). 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.

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 ζωῆς (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. 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


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: ὅνως 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, 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), 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, 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. 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

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26 The prepositional phrase in 2:7, ἐν μυστηρίῳ, can be taken either with λαλοῦμεν or with θεοῦ σημεῖον. 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 Prümm, “Mystères,” DBSup 6:193; Fee, First Epistle, 104–5; Schrage, Erste Brief, 251).


28 Seyoon Kim points out that it was on this occasion that Paul changed from viewing the crucified Christ as a σκανδαλον 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 1:23–29; 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, 1990), 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 spirit\(^32\) 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,


\(^{32}\) 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 Neu- testamentliche Studien für Rudolf Bultmann zu seinem siebzigsten Geburtsstag am 20. August 1954 (BZNW 21; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1954), 4; Brown, Sonetic Background, 49; Barrett, First Epistle, 71; Fee, First Epistle, 105. Hans Conzelmann refers to this idea as the Revelationschema, 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

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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 ἐνφύσιν 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.

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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. 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 πρὸ, 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. 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.

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. 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).

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), 59. 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. 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). 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. 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.
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 (pneumatikos), which is used synonymously.

The antithesis between pneumatikos and psychikos is puzzling, as Paul’s usual antonym for pneumatikos is sarkikos. 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 Triblet; LD 160; Paris: Cerf, 1995), 366–67; Thielson, 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 should already in this life 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 Têleioς is variously translated. The basic idea of its Hebrew equivalent, טהה, is that of wholeness and completeness (B. Kedar-Kopfstein, טהה, TWAT 8:691), a meaning that also can be observed in the Greek têleioς (cf. 1 Cor 13:10). In opposition to tôiς, 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 Delling, “têleος κτλ.,” TDNT 8:67–77).


50 Allo, Première Épître aux Corinthiens, 40; Hugo Odéberg, Pauli brev till korintierna (Tolknings av Nya Testamentet 7; Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelsens Bokförlag, 1944), 66; Wilckens, Weisheit und Torheit, 53; Rudolf Schnackenburg, “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 Frittmann, who stresses that the appropriation of the mystery is gradual (“Mystères,” 191, 197–98).

51 Schnimthals, 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. 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 (θείον πνεύματι), and one that lives by blood and the pleasures of the flesh (Her. 57). Against the Corinthian understanding of spirituality as a nature given by God, Paul presumably emphasizes that true spiritu-

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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 13:42–49 Paul is concerned to combat the Philonic interpretation of Gen 2:7, however. Paul insists that the natural (φυσικός) 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 evalu-
ate 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 πνευ-
ματικός 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 "per-
fect" must be identified with all believers. We have seen that the content of wis-
dom 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 Termi-
nology, 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.
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 φυσή 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 ἐγνώκας αὐτῶν (v. 9), must be taken as an inclusive reference, with which Paul also intends the Corinthians. 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:

- “those who are saved” vs. “those who are lost” (1:18)
- “those who believe” vs. “Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom” (1:19–22)
- “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), τέλειος is used for someone who is righteous. 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...
3:1–4. The contrast between the τέλειος and the νήπιος is well attested. 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 ὁσιοί 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 ὁσιοί 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. 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.

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,
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. In this passage as well, perfection is not a present reality for every Christian but rather an eschatological reality. 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.

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 σαρκίνος/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 Épitre aux Colossiens [EBib 20; Paris: Gabalda, 1993], 22–30, 208–9, 277–80). See also John M. G. Barchay, 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 [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 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 παρακελώσει 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 Guiika, Der Kolosserbrief [HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1980], 104; Aletti, Colossians, 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). 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. 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, our conclusion must run along similar lines as Peter T. O’Brien’s interpretation of the τελειοι 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. 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.


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, “τέλειος,” 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 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.
